

CAIN AND ABEL

Genesis 3 tragically ends with Adam and Eve being banished from the Garden of Eden. Their life of only knowing good had ended. Ahead of them was a life in which they would know both good and evil. They and their descendants faced an existence where there would be toil, sweat, pain and death.

However, Genesis 4 opens in a positive way by telling us that Adam had sexual relations with his wife Eve and in due course Cain was born. Some time later his brother Abel arrived. When the brothers were older they proved to be very different. Abel served God but Cain argued with God. This difference led to one killing the other

The conflict between Cain and Abel was predicted by God before they were born. Straight after the fall into sin God had spoken of the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent, or as a more literal translation has it - the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. It meant that among the descendants of Adam and Eve there would be line that would follow and obey God and a line that would follow the evil ways of the devil. But not only that, these two lines would also be in conflict with each other. There was going to be enmity between them. All that sounded rather dark and foreboding but Adam and Eve also received comfort from God. He promised the coming of the Redeemer who would overcome those who do evil and crush the devil himself. It meant that those who believed and obeyed God will ultimately be victorious in this conflict between good and evil.

When Adam and Eve were driven out of Paradise they soon realised the harsh consequences of their disobedience to God. In fact, they came to experience the results of sin rather soon within their own family. The conflict between good and evil that God had spoken about was there already in the lives of their first two children. It came to a head when they both offered a sacrifice and God accepted Abel's and not Cain's.

Let's now hear what actually happened as we listen to the message of God's Word as given us in Hebrews 11:4. It's about CAIN AND ABEL.

1. What Genesis 4 tells us about Cain and Abel.

Our text says that Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain did but in order to understand how that came about we need to look at Genesis 4. The biblical story about Cain and Abel is a true story because the Lord Jesus spoke of Abel as an historical person. Jesus had been denouncing the Pharisees as hypocrites and in His description of them it is clear that He regarded them as being the offspring of the devil. In their persecution of Jesus the Pharisees were the same as all those others before them who had murdered the righteous people of God. It had begun with Abel when his righteous blood was shed, the Lord said [Mt.23:35].

The apostle John in his first letter also referred to Cain and Abel as being real people. He said: "*Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's righteous*" [1 Jn.3:12]. So John also put Cain among those who were of the offspring of the devil and Abel among the offspring of the woman.

But how did Abel offer a better sacrifice than Cain? Let's look at their names. When Cain was born, Eve said, "*With the help of the Lord I have gotten a man*" [Gen.4:1]. The name Cain means 'gotten' or 'acquired'. Adam and Eve acknowledged that their first baby came with the help of the Lord. Adam and Eve after their disobedience and fall into sin were still believers. They remembered that the Lord had promised that Someone who would crush Satan but they were not given a timeframe. Perhaps their first-born son might be this Saviour.

When Adam and Eve got their second son, he was given the name Abel. His name means 'breadth' or 'vapour'. The word points to something that is fleeting, of not having much substance. We're not told how long after Cain Abel was born but Cain's name had a ring of optimism about it and Abel's name a touch of pessimism. When Cain was born Adam and Eve were still fresh out of paradise but when Abel was born Adam and Eve had spent more time in a world now marred by struggle and toil.

Cain and Abel grew up side by side. Adam and Eve told them about God's perfect creation and what it was like to have no sin in you or around you. They told their sons about the reality of the devil, how they had given in to his prompting to eat from the tree of life and how that act of disobedience had brought about the fall into sin and what terrible consequences that had on themselves and the whole creation. As they grew up the boys saw in their parents' life the struggle with the power of sin and they discovered the same struggle in their own lives.

Adam and Eve also talked about God's promise of a Saviour who would destroy the devil and they encouraged each other and their sons to keep believing in God in a world that was no longer perfect.

When the boys were men, Abel worked with animals and Cain worked the land. The one a shepherd and the other a farmer. They both brought offerings to God. Abel sacrificed from the flocks and Cain from what the land produced. They had learnt that practice from their parents who themselves offered sacrifices to God.

How do we know this? Well, consider the experience of Adam and Eve in their relationship with God. They had lived in a perfect creation where all animals lived in peace and where the bush around them was a garden and held no dangers. But the fall into sin had changed all that. The curse of sin had turned the animal world into tooth and claw. Some but not all animals could be tamed for the Lord had put a fear of man into animals in order to protect man. Some animals had to be killed and their hides used for clothing. God had also cursed the ground. The land was no longer the same. It would now resist man's efforts to cultivate it. Man could grow and eat plants from it but there were now also thorns and thistles to contend with. Work had become difficult.

Yet Adam and Eve looked to God for their survival. Shortly after the fall into sin God had told them of the consequences. Man would die yet God had promised a Saviour. So Adam turned to his wife and named her Eve. Eve means living and it showed that Adam believed God and understood that Eve would bear children. The human race would go on and from the seed of the woman the Saviour would come. Adam and Eve discovered that God was showing them His grace. He was more than a God of justice only.

Now in that environment of struggle and hope, of sin and faith, Adam and Eve regularly sacrificed to God and taught their children to do the same. How else would Cain and Abel have known about the practice of bringing offerings to God? A sacrifice is offering God something of the bounty that He is giving. It is done out of thankfulness for God's blessings of grace. They were still alive even though sin had brought death. They had food and shelter and clothes even though the ground was cursed. Sacrifices show devotion to God. God is pleased to receive them for it reveals what attitude there is towards God. With the first family these sacrifices were either an animal or something from the land. That's what they possessed. And it didn't matter whether it was an animal sacrifice or the fruit of the land.

And so in the course of time "*Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord and Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock*" [vs.4]. And Genesis 4 tells us that "*the Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering He did not look with favour*" [vs.5]. And our text in Hebrews 11: 4 says, "*By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.*"

Somehow the brothers knew the nature of God's reaction to their offering and Cain became very angry and his face showed it. In His grace God talked with Cain and showed how he too could be accepted. It all had to do with mastering the power of sin in your heart. But Cain did not respond to God's offer of help. He became more determined to allow sin to rule him. When the right moment was there, Cain invited his brother to join him in the field. Not suspecting anything sinister Abel went along. Cain attacked his brother and killed him. Why did he do this terrible thing? The apostle John explains: "*Because his own acts were evil and his brother righteous*" [1 Jn.3:12].

2. The nature of their sacrifices.

We have already said that the difference between Abel's sacrifice and Cain's did not lie in what they offered to the Lord. A sheep or a goat is not necessarily a better sacrifice than grain or vegetables. Later on when God instructed Israel about what sacrifices of thanks they were to bring then He included offerings both from their flocks and grain from their harvests. Our offerings today consist mainly of gifts of money but if we were to give other substances then it wouldn't matter if one brought a water melon, another a cake, or another housing materials. It can all be used to serve the Lord in helping others.

How did Cain and Abel know that the Lord had accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's? Some wild guesses have been suggested about that. Some children's bibles show the smoke of Abel's offering going straight up and the smoke of Cain's offering going sideways and down. The Bible says nothing about that. All we're told is that God looked with favour on Abel's offering and not so on Cain's. It was not the offering itself that made the difference. Our text explains that God spoke well of Abel's offering because Abel offered by faith and for that he was commended as a righteous man. In those early days there were no prophets and there was not yet a Bible. God made Himself known by speaking and these first chapters of Genesis show God having conversations with Adam and Eve and with Cain. So presumably Cain and Abel knew how God had received their offering because God told them.

The difference between Cain's and Abel's offerings was the attitude in their hearts towards God's grace. Though both sons had received the same upbringing they had responded differently. Cain did not turn to God in his heart. He had allowed the power of sin to control him. When he was angry with God not being pleased with his sacrifice, God said to Cain that he must do the right thing. He must not give in to sin. He must struggle against its power. He must have his heart in this struggle. Just a token resistance will not win the battle. He must with his heart love God and not evil.

God said, *"If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it"* [Gen.4:7]. God gave Cain a gracious assurance that he would be accepted if he does right but also a clear warning that sin will come through the door of his heart and stay there if he does not do what is right. Even then, Cain decided to remain stubborn. His sinful heart caused him to murder his brother because he could not stand it that he was evil and his brother righteous. From then on Cain's life was empty of God and he had no peace.

Abel also had a sinful nature. Like we all have. But Abel fought against it. Abel was not judged righteous because he was successful in fighting sin. How well we know from our own experience and how clear the Bible teaches us that in ourselves we are no match for the power of Satan and sin. But Abel took to heart the valuable lessons his parents taught him and he looked to God to help him. He saw God's grace and goodness and put his hope in the Saviour who was to come to restore what sin had destroyed. Abel had turned to God in his heart. He knew from his parents about the devil and about pain and toil in a world cursed because of sin. He knew why there thorns and thistles to contend with and why there was death. Like his parents Abel also believed and trusted that God was going to send a Deliverer and overcome all what is crooked and wrong.

All what Abel learnt about God was to him as the whole Bible is to us. We too know that in Christ God has conquered the power of sin and death. We have heard of God's grace. We too may believe and trust Him. And we offer our gifts and our own selves to God. Then He accepts us and what we bring Him for Jesus' sake. He sees that we want to serve Him and acknowledge His grace and goodness.

In their sacrifices Cain and Abel showed the attitude of their hearts to God. It showed in Cain the tell-tale characteristics of what lives in those who are of the offspring of the devil and in Abel the characteristics of what lives in those who are of the offspring of the woman. Their lives were the way they were because of the inclination of their hearts. And the way of Cain continued on in his descendants. The remainder of Genesis 4 speaks about the children of Cain and how they also lived without God in their hearts. But the chapter ends with the announcement that Seth was born. The godly seed that was in Abel continued on in Seth and again in his son Enosh. The last sentence of chapter 4 is glorious, *"At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord."*

With the murder of Abel it looked as if the line of evil had won another victory. The devil had engineered the fall into sin and death had come. But God in His grace gave Adam and Eve and male child. Life was going to continue. But then the devil worked his evil influence in Cain who didn't resist. He continued to let the devil have his way with him when he murdered his righteous brother. The devil rejoiced. But God stepped in again and Seth was born. The line of the woman continued. Men began to call on the name of the Lord. And eventually the line of the woman triumphed with the birth of Christ, the Redeemer.

To what line do you belong? It is a necessary question to ask of both young and old when you have not committed yourself to either the side of God or to the side of Satan. Sometimes you might do things that please Satan. At other times you might do things that please God. The important question is - with whom is your heart? With God or with Satan? Is there an Abel in you or a Cain? With that we come to our last point.

3. Abel's faith still speaks.

The text from Hebrews 11:4 says, *"And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead ."* Abel was the first human to die a physical death as well as the first believer to violently die in the conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. But how does Abel still speak to us today? And about what does the dead Abel still speak? That question is answered by the whole of Hebrews 11. It speaks of many believers who believed and trusted in God's promise of a new paradise. Not only did God promise Adam and Eve that Someone would come to crush Satan, but that Someone, who is Christ, will also bring about a whole new order. All believers mentioned in Hebrews 11 looked forward to this. Together they were of the line that believed and trusted in God, even when they faced trials and persecution. Abel was just one of the many. Their faith and what they did through faith is recorded for us in this chapter. In that way they still speak to us, even if they have all gone to be with the Lord.

But what exactly is it that they still speak? Well, we have been looking at Abel and his testimony is that we are all mere creatures who because of the fall into sin live in a world that is under the curse of sin. This does not mean that there is nothing good left in God's creation. By God's grace we can still live and work, marry and have children. In other words, generations continue right up to Christ's coming again. And around us we can see nature, there are trees, shrubs and flowers. There are animals of all kinds. There's the sun and clouds bring rain. People are busy with their labour and industry. And we ourselves are alive. We live and work, yes even in the face of toil and struggle.

Now all that says that God has not forsaken the world which is under the curse of sin. And most important of all God's Word tells us that Christ will come to fully redeem all those who are of that line that leads to Him. He will deliver them from this conflict from those who are the offspring of Satan. For them Christ will make all things new. They may humbly approach God, put their trust in Him and worship Him by offering themselves in faithful service.

That's what Abel did. God has again today spoken to us about Abel and God is persuading us to be like Abel and not like Cain. When we look at what God's Word says about Abel then he still speaks to us today.

Of course in a similar way Cain still speaks too. His life tells us not to harden our hearts to God's call and to resist the power of sin. Cain allowed sin to enter his heart and he did not master it. As time went on the power of sin in him became stronger. Cain had no peace. He became a restless wanderer. Right now Cain is in torment whilst Abel is with God waiting for the coming of the new heaven and earth.

Abel's blood, shed a long time ago, still cries out for justice. And God will bring justice on killers like Cain. It will not go well for them in the final judgment. Abel's blood could do nothing for Cain, except to point to him and say that he did it, that he is the guilty one. But Christ's blood, His sacrifice, is different. It can bring pardon to all who come to the Saviour for mercy. That's why we mustn't look to Abel only. Notwithstanding his faith and righteousness Abel was still a sinful human being. So is everybody after the fall into sin. Even those believers mentioned in Hebrews 11. Abraham, Moses, Jacob, and the rest, they all sinned even though they believed in God. But not Christ. He never sinned. And that's why He is the Saviour we need and not these other believers. Only Christ was perfect. Yet He died for the sin of all who belonged to the offspring of the woman. His blood was shed for all the saved. All the Abel types are saved by Christ's blood. And all the Cain types need that blood too. Amen.

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Gosnells, 16 May 2004.