

WHAT A DEAD MAN SAYS TO THE LIVING

"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" (Hebrews 11:4).

Faith occupies an important place and plays an important part in the life of a Christian. By faith we are saved. By faith we serve unto blessing. So, we need to know what faith is and what it does.

The realm in which faith functions is two fold: first, in things hoped for, and second, in things not seen. "Things hoped for" are not present, else we would not be hoping for them. "Things hoped for" do not belong to the world of nature to be seen with the natural eye, felt with the natural hand, or sensed with the natural functions. Faith pulls into the world things that are out of the world and makes them as assured as if they were present and actual. It does not give them material reality, but it does give them assured reality. It does not give them actual being, but it does give them apprehended being. Faith also functions in the realm of "things not seen." Faith pulls into the world things that are out of the world and makes them not materially but convincingly visible. It does not make them a dream but a demonstration. It dips into the past, embraces the present, and reaches into the future. It deals with the unrealized and the unseen.

The writer to the Hebrews begins his honor roll of the heroes of faith with the name of Abel. The feat of Abel, which is mentioned in our text, has a scriptural story of interest and importance.

I. The Story.

This story takes us back to the first home that was ever established -- the home of Adam and Eve. That home, which was of divine appointment, was designed for the increase of human family, the happiness of the race and the training of children.

When Eve had given birth to her first child, she rightly acknowledged the hand of God in the birth of her son in these words: "I have gotten a man from the Lord," or, as another version has it, "I have gotten a man with the help of Jehovah." Thus Eve gave the credit for her great joy to the proper Person. Every parent should recognize, as Eve did, that God's gift of a child is to be cherished as a sacred and precious trust. This first boy was named "Cain," which signified an "acquisition" or a "possession" of great value.

When a second son was born to Adam and Eve, there was no indication that Eve rejoiced over his birth as she had over that of Cain. He was named "Abel," which signifies "breath," or "vapor." His very name was prophetic of the brevity of his earthly life.

These parents did not allow their boys to spend their time in idleness, but taught them to work and required them to develop their energies in useful employment. They reminded us of the necessity and dignity of work as one of the very essentials of human life and progress.

As is often the case in families, these brothers were as different as if they were not relatives. They were different in their personalities, interests and occupations. Cain chose an active occupation and became a tiller of the field or an agriculturist. Abel chose the peaceful work of a shepherd and became a keeper of sheep.

These brothers were taught to worship as well as to work. Born of the same parents, reared in the same home, taught the same things and living in the same environment, these brothers became worshippers of the same God, at the same place, at the same altar and in the same way, namely, by the presentation of offerings. They knew what many church members today have never learned, namely, that worship is giving rather than getting, and ascribing rather than appropriating. Evidently Adam and Eve had given their sons definite instruction to the effect that there was a particular time to which they were to worship God. That time was "at the end of days," the days of the week, meaning the Sabbath. A prescribed means of worship was implied also. God could be approached and worshipped by means of a sacrifice.

II. The Sacrifices.

A day arrived when Cain and Abel came to worship and to present their offerings to God. Cain brought to God the fruit of the cursed earth, which had been produced by the labors of a sinful man, believing that God would accept his offering, inasmuch as he thought that he had done the best he could in producing it. Note three things about his offering: first, it was a bloodless one, and "without shedding of blood is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22); second, it consisted of the fruit of his own toil, and it was the product of his own labors and the work of his own hands; third, in bringing "the fruit of the ground" (Genesis 3:17) he ignored the fact that God had cursed the ground and for that reason would not accept the fruit thereof as an offering for sin. There is no doubt that his offering cost him considerable labor and toil, and probably it was with much satisfaction that he came before the Lord, but the Lord had no respect unto his gift.

In making his offering Abel "brought of the firstlings of his flock and the fat thereof," which was the best that he had. To do so, sacrifice had to be made, blood had to be shed and life had to be taken. Abel simply took a lamb, slew it, took it and presented it to the Lord. By faith he did so, and acknowledged the fact that he was a sinner, admitted that he was under the penalty of sin which is death, and owned the fact that he deserved to die. When he approached his Creator, he presented to God a substitutionary victim, whose blood had been shed and whose life had been taken.

By his action Abel seemed to say, "Death is what I deserve and I confess it, but I come to Thee depending entirely on the merits of another." Abel's lamb prefigured the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. Because he recognized the personal need as a sinner, "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 figts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh."

The sacrifice of Abel was a sacrifice by faith. It was this that brought testimony from God and got testimony for Abel and gave testimony from Abel. Abel's sacrifice looked away from what the world had to offer, or what man could offer of his own works. Cain brought what man could make nature do. His offering pointed to the world -- its farmers and fields and fruits. Abel's offering turned the things about. Cain's was a beautiful offering, and Abel's was a bloody offering. Abel's sacrifice did not point to man's merit, but to God's grace. It pulled the unactualized cross of Christ into present assurance. It took the unseen and made it evident.

The faith of Abel is seen in that he saw himself as a sinful man needing forgiveness. He did not expect his own character to merit forgiveness. He did not expect his own good works to earn forgiveness. He brought his gift to God and worshipped on the basis of his understanding that he did not have a single thing in himself that made him worthy to worship a holy God, but he pinned his faith on the blood of his sacrifice that he brought with him.

By killing the lamb and offering it to God, Abel acknowledged that God was righteous in driving fallen man out of Eden; that he was a guilty sinner, and that death was his just due; that God was holy, and must punish sin; that God was merciful, and willing to accept the death of an innocent substitute in his place; and that he looked for acceptance with God in Christ the Lamb of God. Abel, therefore, stands for the truth of salvation by blood shedding.

III. The Sequel.

When God rejected the offering of Cain and accepted the offering of Abel, the Bible says, "Cain was very wroth," or, as we would express it today, "It burned him up." Abel noticed that Cain was enraged, but his subsequent attitude left Abel under the impression that Cain had forgotten it. In his hypocrisy, Cain deliberately led Abel out into a field where others would not see what he was about to do. With jealousy and hatred smouldering in his heart, Cain arose and killed his brother. The Bible doesn't tell us how he murdered Abel, but perhaps it was by bludgeoning him to death. Sin, which ruined the first man, prompted the second man to murder the third man. In killing his brother Cain proved that he was under the control of Satan.

This first murder was an attack on faith. Satan and the world are set against faith. Let a man show real faith and he is sure to arouse hostility. Abel is not the last victim of a faith-hating world.

A

Abel who offered sacrifice by faith was murdered by man, but he was approved by God: "Abel . . . obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts."

At least four thousand years after Abel died, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews wrote: "He being dead yet speaketh." Who ever heard of such a thing as a dead man speaking to the living? How could he speak after he was slain? It does not mean that he literally spoke or uttered words. Abel's bloody sacrifice has never ceased to speak of Christ's death for sinners.

It has been more than six thousand years since Abel was murdered, and yet he tells us that our lives and our deeds live on long after we are gone from this sphere of mundane activity. Your life and your influence are not going to end when they put your body down into the ground. Your influence will live on and on and on in the days to come. Abel's blood also tells us that sin must be punished. His blood also cries from the ground to tell us that acceptable religious worship must be according to divine revelation. His blood reminds us that the only way to come to God is through a substitutionary sacrifice. Abel's blood tells us that it is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved.

Although Abel died for his faith, he is still speaking to us. Moffatt made this splendid comment: "Death is never the last word in the life of a righteous man." Able died, but by his faith he is speaking to us still. It is wonderful that he can still speak to us after all these centuries. He has had far more influence since his death than he did during his brief lifetime.

In "The Psalm of Life" Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote:

"Lives of great men all remind us,
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us,
Footprints on the sands of time;
Footprints that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again."

Those who have lived with us and then left us still speak to us through their influence. We cherish numerous and fond memories of what they were, what they said, and what they did. Good deeds often make their doers immortal. John Harvard put seven hundred pounds, which now would be about two thousand dollars, into the University at Cambridge which bears his name, but his name will not perish. Elihu Yale gave less than two hundred pounds to the College at New Haven, which is now Yale University, but his name has been immortalized by that institution.

Many good men have died, but they continue to live in their writings, which elevate and bless. It is wonderful that through the printed page people can speak for God to others centuries after they have been removed from the scenes of their actions.

What is true of the good is true also of the bad. The skeptical, the profane and the impure corrupt those who read their writings, after they have died. How many have been defiled and poisoned in mind and soul by vile literature! What a terrible retribution awaits those who have written against God, against the Bible and against the teachings of Christ! What a terrifying thought that a bad life goes exerting its baleful and corrupting influence after death!

When a man leaves this world, he leaves something in it. He may leave something which will grow and spread like a canker, or like a poison seeping through life. He may leave something fine which blossoms and flourishes without end. Let us leave behind us that which will enrich and bless the lives of those who will come after us.