

A FAITH LIKE ABEL’S (Hebrews 11:4)

If you are a true baseball fan, you might wish you were in Cooperstown, New York today because at 12:30 CST a new class of honorees will be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Through the years, 340 men have been enshrined into that elite collection of baseball greats.

If you are a football fan, you might like to visit the NFL Hall of Fame in Canton Ohio. On Saturday, August 8th eight more will be added to that hall. There are 262 members in the NFL Hall of Fame.

If you are a basketball fan, you might prefer to travel to Springfield, Massachusetts where you could visit the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. Instead of just focusing on the NBA, it celebrates the game of basketball at every level. More than 400 players and individuals have been inducted into that hall. Their next induction ceremony will be Saturday, September 10th.

And, if you are a golf fan like myself, you might rather make your way to the World Golf Hall of Fame in Augustine, Florida, but it won’t be there much longer because in 2024 it is moving back to Pinehurst, NC where it first started. Since professional golf is an individual rather than a team sport, there are only 164 men and women who made it into that exclusive company of superstars. The hall won’t have its next induction ceremony until 2024 when the U.S. Open returns to the Pinehurst Resort and Country Club. Pinehurst Resort offers 9 golf courses. The U.S. Open will be played at its most famous course—Pinehurst #2.

There are hundreds if not thousands of halls of fame in America in many various categories. Of course, there are sports halls of fame, music halls of fame, entertainment halls of fame, academic halls of fame, business halls of fame, and numerous others.

Oklahoma City is home to the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, which is popularly known as the Cowboy Hall of Fame, and there is the Softball Hall of Fame. In Stillwater you can find the Wrestling Hall of Fame.

Today, as we focus on just one verse in Hebrews 11, we find ourselves in a hall of fame of sorts. This chapter of Scripture is often referred to as the Hall of Faith. It presents to us men and women of the OT who distinguished themselves by their faith. Verse 2 calls them “the people of old” who had “received their commendation.”

Beginning in v. 4, the author of Hebrews introduces us to them one-by-one, and he tells us what they did by their faith. Their faith enabled them to act in heroic ways.

If you are a golfer, you might wish you could swing a golf club like Tiger Woods. As a businessman, you might wish you could invest money like Warren Buffet. If you enjoy cooking, you might wish you had the skill of a Wolfgang Puck or a Gordon Ramsay.

Today, our focus is on faith, and the first person that is held up to us is a man named Abel. We would do well to have a faith like Abel’s. We are shown three things that will happen if you and I have a faith like Abel’s.

Before we look at those three things, we need to take a moment to familiarize ourselves with just who Abel was. We are told his story in Genesis 4. He was a member of the very first family. His father was Adam. His mother was Eve. He had an older

brother named Cain. Abel was the fourth person to live on planet Earth. Abel was a shepherd. His brother was a farmer. Let's read Genesis 4:1-10.

Both Abel and his older brother Cain sought to worship God. They brought an offering to Him. We are not told the details, but it appears that God had appointed a place for this first family to worship. A time had been set aside for this worship to take place. A portion of this worship involved bringing an offering. Both men brought an offering in keeping with their profession. Abel brought the first born of his flock and the fat portion. Cain, however, brought some of his produce. We are not told that it was the first fruit or the best fruit, but just some of his fruit, what he had on hand.

God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's. Again, we are not expressly told how God accepted one and not another, but we can make a good guess. There are five occasions in Scripture where God sent down fire to consume a sacrifice. One of the most well-known is the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal.

In 1 Kings 18 we are told how Elijah proposed a contest with the prophets of Baal. He suggested that they each erect an altar on top of Mount Carmel. Upon each of the two altars there was to be placed a bull. The prophets of Baal were to pray that their god would send fire to consume the sacrifice. Elijah was to pray to his God asking Him to do the same. The prophets of Baal prayed for hours, nothing happened.

Elijah made fun of those false prophets and their false god. He said, "Maybe he's gone to bathroom. Maybe he's out taking a walk. Maybe he's asleep, and you need to awaken him." Regardless, Baal didn't show up; he didn't send fire.

Now, it was Elijah's turn. After preparing the altar and the sacrifice, Elijah did something odd. He dug a trench around the altar and poured gallons upon gallons of water on the sacrifice. There was so much water, that it filled the trench. If you want something to be consumed with fire, you would not think it is a good idea to pour water on it.

Then, Elijah prayed a short prayer and BOOM, God sent fire. The fire completely consumed the sacrifice and the wood on which it had been placed. Even the stones of the altar were incinerated, and all the water was licked up. No moisture was left.

That is what happened in 1 Kings 18, and there are four other times when God accepted a sacrifice by sending fire. Many commentators are of the opinion that God accepted Abel's offering of an animal sacrifice by doing something similar while Cain's sacrifice of vegetables and fruit were left to spoil in the sun.

A Faith Like Abel's Leads to God-Approved Worship

We have to ask, "Why did God accept Abel's sacrifice while He did not accept Cain's?" Quite simply, Abel brought what God wanted to receive while Cain brought what Cain wanted to give.

There is nothing wrong with non-meat sacrifices. The OT Law makes provisions for grain offerings, but when it comes to a sin offering, God requires blood to be spilled. When Cain and Abel's parents sinned in the Garden of Eden, they became aware of their nakedness. They were ashamed. It is both natural and right for sin to make you ashamed.

We have psychologists today who teach that no one should feel shame for anything. That is bad counsel. It is not good to remain in shame, but our shame and our guilt is

meant to turn us to God.

God came to Adam and Eve's rescue. He provided them with animal skins, fur coats, to cover their nakedness. In order for them to have such covering, it required the death of those animals. God didn't just shear some sheep.

If our sin is to be covered it requires a blood sacrifice. As we have seen in our journey through Hebrews, all those OT sacrifices of bulls and goats and lambs which were inadequate pointed forward to the one sacrifice of Jesus that was totally sufficient. His one sacrifice of Himself provided for all time what was needed for our redemption.

Before Cain brought any other kind of offering to God, God wanted him to bring a blood sacrifice. Cain chose to do it his way rather than God's way. Jude v. 11 warns about "the way of Cain." Cain's way was opposite of Abel's way which was the way of faith. The opposite of the way of faith is the way of self-sufficiency.

Those who travel in the way of Cain take as their theme song Frank Sinatra's famous hit, "I Did It My Way." Listen to the words of the last verse of that song:

For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself then he has naught
Not to say the things that he truly feels
And not the words of someone who kneels
Let the record show I took all the blows
and did it my way

That is not a Christian song. That is the way of Cain not the way of Abel and the way of faith. Let the record show that Jesus took the blows; so, let's do it His way.

If we are to worship God aright and in a way of which He will approve, we must approach Him in faith. Look again at the beginning of v. 4. In this instance, faith prompted obedience. While faith begets obedience, willfulness always gives birth to disobedience.

Don't do it your way; do it God's way. That stands true in any and every arena of life.

- Don't do marriage your way; do it God's way.
- Don't do parenting your way; do it God's way.
- Don't do church your way; do it God's way.
- Don't do life your way; do it God's way.

God's way for us is the way of faith. That is what He blesses—every time.

A Faith Like Abel's Leads to God-Given Righteousness

The text says that Abel was commended as righteous. Be sure to note that the verse begins with the words "By faith," and the matter of him being commended as righteous was preceded by the words "through which." It was through faith that Abel was commended as righteous. It was not his offering that made Abel righteous; it was his faith. His offering was prompted by faith, and faith was the cause of Abel being accepted as righteous.

Let's take a moment to reflect on what the word *righteous* actually means. To be

righteous is to be rightly related to God. It is to stand in right relationship with Him.

Righteousness is always a gift; it is never an achievement. We never achieve righteousness; we receive it. Righteousness is conferred upon us.

The two most theological books of the NT are Romans and Hebrews. We read in Romans 3:10, “None is righteous, no, not one.” Paul spends the first two and a half chapters of Romans making the case that the Jews lack righteousness; the Gentiles lack righteousness; in fact, the whole stands guilty before God.

Romans 3:21 stands as the continental divide of the letter. The verse reads, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.” If you or I are going to obtain righteousness, it will have nothing to do with keeping the law and commands of God.

In chapter 4 of Romans, Paul uses Abraham as Exhibit A in his argument that righteousness is obtained through faith and faith alone. Look at Romans 4:3-5.

Another word for *righteousness* would be *salvation*. We are saved by faith. Long before Abraham became the father of faith, Abel portrayed the same truth.

One of my favorite preachers was the late E.V. Hill who pastored the same church in Los Angeles for over 40 years. One of my favorite sermons of his asked the question, “When Was God at His Best?”

During the course of the sermon, he proposed a handful of possible answers, but he rejected each in turn. He suggested God was at his best when He created the heavens, but he concluded, “No.”

Next, he thought that God must have been at his best when he created man. He talked about the amazing abilities and achievements of man, but then he thought better of that answer.

He turned to when God performed miracles, and he mentioned several, but he wasn’t satisfied with that answer.

He ventured, “Jesus died for our sins, rose for our justification. That’s God at His best.” Then, he replied, “No. That’s too great for me. I cannot understand this. It’s too much of a mystery.”

Toward the end of his message, he landed on his answer. Listen to what he said:

Would you like for me to tell you when God was at His best? It isn’t even in the Bible. God was at his best nearly 51 years ago, with a little country boy, whose mother couldn’t make enough money to feed him, and who some people in the country helped raise. At 11 years-old, walking down Grandma Jodi’s lane, this great, big, old God came all the way down and got right into my heart. Then He got up in my head. Then He got all over me. I didn’t know what was happening to me; I didn’t understand it. I had to go home and tell Mama about my experience. She said, “I think God has saved you, boy.”

That is God at His best—when He saved me. When He—the great God of the universe—came all the way down and got into the heart and the spirit of an 11-year-old boy.

He concluded his sermon with these words:

God is at His best when He's saving . . . It took a miracle to put that sun in place. It took a miracle to put the moon in space. But when he saved my soul, cleansed and made me whole, that was God at His best.

This past week at Falls Creek, I got a front-row seat to watch God at His best. Night after night, God got into the heart and minds of students. They placed their faith in Him, and He made them righteous. He saved them.

God will be at the best in your life if you will say "yes" to Him.

One final thought . . .

A Faith Like Abel's Leads to God-Honoring Witness

Look at the final sentence of v. 4. "And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks." It is interesting that the blood of Abel cried out to God from the ground, after he died. It was also after he died that the voice of Abel has continued to speak through the centuries.

What has Abel been saying through all the millennia since his death? In his commentary, John MacArthur wrote:

He says three things: man comes to God by faith, not works; man must accept and obey God's revelation above his reason and self-will; and sin is severely punished. This is Abel's timeless three-point sermon to the world . . .

Have you ever known anybody who had the gift of gab, who just talked and talked? When I served another church, a staff member who was there when I arrived gave me a list, which was thereafter known as "the list." It contained the names of people who I did not want to get caught on the phone with because they would go on and on. In time I learned the accuracy of the list, and over time, we added some more names to the list.

No one has spoken as long and as often as Abel. There were only three people in the history of the world who predated Abel. Abel spoke through his life, and even death has not quieted his speech.

The question we have to answer is, "Am I listening?"

I want to share with you the words of a man who though dead still speaks. I had read these words one before, but I didn't know the story behind these words. The camp pastor this past week spoke of a Rwandan pastor who in 1980 was told by his tribe to either renounce Christ or be killed. He refused to renounce Christ, and he was immediately martyred. The night before, he wrote the following words. They were found in his desk after he died.

The Fellowship of the Unashamed

I am part of the "Fellowship of the Unashamed."
The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line.
The decision has been made. I am a disciple of
Jesus Christ. I won't look back, let up, slow down,
back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present
makes sense, and my future is secure.

I am finished and done with low living, sight walking,
small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams,
chintzy giving, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position,
promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I now live by
presence, lean by faith, love by patience,
lift by prayer, and labor by power. My pace
is set, my gait is fast, my goal is Heaven, my
road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few,
my Guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought,
compromised, deterred, lured away, turned back,
diluted, or delayed.

I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the
presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy,
ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander
in the maze of mediocrity.

I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. I must go until
Heaven returns, give until I drop, preach until all know,
and work until He comes. And when He comes to get
His own, He will have no problem recognizing me.
My colors will be clear.

I invite you to join the fellowship of the unashamed. Such people are people of faith.
They have a faith like Abel's. Are you among their number?