

Faith Reformed Church
Stevensville, Ontario
October 26, 2008
Morning Service

Text: Hebrews 11:4
Sermon: The Faith that Puts Us Right with God

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.

Last week we began our study of Hebrews 11. You can think of this chapter as a story of Old Testament heroes of the faith. Over the course of the next weeks we will be taking a walk through biblical history and meeting Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses and many others. But even more than the story of these particular men, the story of Hebrews 11 is a story of the one faith they were each given by God to possess and exercise. It is a story of what true faith is and how that true faith is to be lived out. From our preliminary study last week we have already seen two things that faith does. It makes present and real to us things that are in the future and invisible. Faith makes us “certain of what we do not [yet] see” (vs. 1b). You may look at your life and say, “It doesn’t look like I am walking in victory. My bank account is low. My health is shot. I have a terrible boss at work. But these things are not the measure of victory. Faith lets me know I know that I have a Father in heaven. It tells me that all things come to me from his loving hands and that the God who sent his Son to die in my place will not let anything happen to me that is not for my ultimate blessing. I can’t see that now, but I don’t have to. It is enough for me to trust my Lord and to rest upon his promises.”

Faith also opens our eyes to see that there is a creator behind the creation. By faith we come to understand that the universe is not the result of some cosmic accident, but was “formed at God’s command.” By faith we come to see that creation is not, as some hold, a matter of random, impersonal and purposeless mutations that are at the centre of a meaningless life, but that creation comes from God, has a purpose, a meaning and a destiny. In the time ahead we will find other things that faith does. It pleases God. It does good work. It looks upon a heavenly city. It trusts God’s promises. It overcomes obstacles. In his First Letter the apostle John tells us in a comprehensive way what faith does when he says,

This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

Let’s turn to our lesson, picking things up at verse 4:

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.

Our author takes us back to the dawn of human history, to the first brothers, Cain and Abel. The story he refers to is found in Genesis 4. This is what happened. Cain was a farmer. Abel was a shepherd. They came to worship God. Cain brought along an offering of the crops he had grown. Abel brought an offering of the firstfruits of his flocks—lambs to be sacrificed.

God accepted Abel's offering, but rejected Cain's. As a result, Cain became very angry.

Now Hebrews says that Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's because of faith. "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did." There are two things we have to consider in coming to an understanding of what this means. We have to look at the two men and we have to look at the two sacrifices. First of all, because Abel was a man of faith and Cain wasn't, God accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's. John Calvin said this:

The sacrifice of Abel was more acceptable than that of his brother only because it was sanctified by faith.... Where did his pleasing [of God] come from other than that he had a heart purified by faith.

In emphasising the difference between the two men, Calvin is pointing out the truth that no sacrifice is acceptable if it does not come from a sincere heart of faith and obedience. This is what God thinks of offerings that are rendered to him in a hypocritical manner:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you ring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Amos 5:21-24

Because he lacked faith Cain was unable to please God. His offering was rejected. In fact, given his lack of faith, no offering he brought would have been acceptable to the Lord. But notice this: Not only were these two brothers different, one being a man of faith and the other not, the offerings they brought were different too. When we take a look at the difference between the offerings, we will see the faith of Abel and the unbelief of Cain.

Let me get at it by asking a question. Had God given any commands or regulations concerning how his people were to worship him and what sort of offerings they were to bring? Think back to the fall of man. In Genesis 3:1-7 we find the serpent deceiving the woman so that she ate of the forbidden fruit. Adam joined her in so doing. In the next verses (8-13) we find God confronting our first parents in their sin—and our first parents trying to put the blame anywhere except where it truly belonged. After this, God pronounces curses against the serpent, the woman and Adam (14-19). And after this takes place we find God’s first action to deal with the problem of sin. It is found in Genesis 3:21. “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”

You see, when Adam and Eve sinned, their eyes were opened and they realized they were naked. They became ashamed and embarrassed. They had never felt that way before. To try to hide their shame and nakedness

they sewed leaves together, hoping these leaves might cover them adequately. It didn't work. They still burned with shame. So God, in mercy, gave them clothes that could cover their nakedness. He dealt with their sin and its consequences by killing an innocent animal, a spotless substitute, and making clothes from its skin. To cover their sin and shame it took nothing less than a sinless substitute to die for them. The great English evangelist George Whitefield said this:

We are told that those coats were made of the skin of beasts.... Those beasts were slain in sacrifice, in commemoration of the great sacrifice, Jesus Christ, thereafter to be offered. And the skins of the beasts thus slain, being put on Adam and Eve, they were hereby taught how their nakedness was to be covered with the righteousness of the Lamb of God.

And so in this way God revealed how it was that sinful man could approach him and what kind of sacrifice he ought to bring; it is only by a blood sacrifice that man is to come into the presence of God.

And it is by this standard we must evaluate the offerings brought to God by Cain and Abel. Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground. There was much to commend this offering. It was a portion of what had come from his own hard labour. God had said to Adam, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen. 3:19) and Cain had brought to God what had come from his hard work. It would have been beautiful, pleasing

to the eye and to the taste. But his offering did not involve the shedding of blood and this is the difference between his sacrifice and Abel's. Abel's sacrifice was better not only because Abel was a man of faith, but because he brought the sacrifice God had established as the means by which he would accept sinful mankind. If Cain had had a heart of faith—had he believed that he was a sinner in need of a substitute to pay for his sins, he would have come to God in God's way—not in a way of his own devising. Cain's sacrifice displayed his heart of unbelief. Abel's sacrifice displayed a heart of faith.

Here are the lessons for us to receive. First: Sinful man is justified—put right with God—only by faith in the blood sacrifice God has provided. This is a teaching the Letter to the Hebrews has repeatedly stressed:

Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people (Hebrews 9:28).

He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself (Hebrews 7:27).

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22).

Beloved, you cannot come to God in any way that you choose. You cannot say, "Because I believe in God I can come into his presence any way that I want." That was Cain's problem. He wanted to decide on what terms he would come to God. He said, in effect, "I will not come to God as a sinner.

I will not humble myself to that degree. After all, I am a righteous man. Look at what I have done. I have grown a great crop. I have worked hard. God will receive me because of my accomplishments when he sees how well I have done.” Cain wanted to come to God on the basis of a sacrifice of his own choosing. But you cannot come to God on your terms; you must humble yourself and come to him on his terms.

When you get right down to it, there are only two kinds of offerings. There are offerings that point to our own work, our own merit, our own righteousness and there are offerings that point to Jesus Christ and what he has done on our behalf. And unless we come to God with empty hands, confessing the guilt of our sin, our need for his grace and our longing to embrace Christ crucified in our place, we are rejecting the only way he has provided for our forgiveness. If we do not come to God in God’s way—both with a heart of faith and a trust in the shed blood of Christ—we will be rejected, condemned for our sins and made to suffer the eternal pains of hell.

James Boice put it this way:

That is the problem with so many “good, religious people.” They come to God with their heightened sense of aesthetics and want to be received by God because of their beautiful offerings. But God rejects them and their godless worship. There is no blood, no Christ and, hence, no true Christianity, no matter how beautiful their service might be.

Now we need to offer our best to God. We should offer beautiful worship to him, because he is deserving of our very best. There is no higher privilege than for us to do all we can to honour and bless his name. But this comes only after the blood, after we have confessed our guilt, after we have placed our faith in the blood of Christ, shed once and for all at Calvary. Here is

Boice again:

If one comes first through faith in Christ and his shed blood then he can present all the beautiful things he is capable of finding or creating. And God will be pleased by this because the person does not trust these things for salvation, but rather is offering them to God just because he loves him and wants to show affection. It is only on the basis of the sacrifice of Christ that one can come.

Our lesson says, “By faith he [Abel] was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings.” Here is one of the great teachings of the Bible: Justification by faith alone. This teaching is at the core of the gospel because it declares the one way a sinner can be put right with a holy God. It is the same lesson as that found in John 3:16, where the Lord Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” By

1. believing in Jesus Christ
2. by resting on his saving work for the forgiveness of our sins,
3. by accepting God’s word and coming to him in the only way he has provided,

we are put right with God. We are declared righteous in his sight. We are not righteous by works that declare our supposed merit, but by a faith that declares our need and our acceptance of God's gracious gift.

Abel was a sinner. He came to God bearing the blood of a substitute. God spoke will of his offering. The blood turned aside the wrath of God by pointing to the sacrifice of Christ that was to come. So God was able to receive Abel with gladness. Cain could have come in that same way. The washing through blood was available to him as well. God said to him, after rejecting his offering, "Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Genesis 4:6-7). But Cain didn't have it in his heart to humble himself before the Almighty God.

You can think of it this way. Justification by faith makes the same claim upon everyone. It is for those who are born in Christian families and those born without Christian families. It is for the rich. It is for the poor. It is for the well connected. It is for the obscure. Everyone may come to God for justification by faith. No one may come to God in any other way. That is why our author is so intent on urging his readers to hold firm to the faith. He knows that it is the one way to be put right with God, and should they turn from it they will lose their souls.

Our lesson ends with these words, “And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.” Cain did not humble himself before the Lord and bring an offering acceptable to God. He hardened his heart and killed his brother instead. But though Abel died, he still speaks. Now it is true that his blood cried out to God from the ground. His murder could not be covered up. But I do not think that is what our lesson means. I think our author is telling us that Abel still bears testimony to the faith that puts us right with God. Think of it his way: What was true for Abel and the original readers of the Letter to the Hebrews remains true for you and me today. There is one way to be forgiven. It is by trusting that when Jesus died on the cross he died for you. It is by trusting that the punishment your sins deserve was laid on Jesus, and the perfect life he lived has been credited to you, as if you yourself had walked in perfect holiness and obedience. That alone can save and that is the lesson Abel still teaches.

It is time to search your hearts. Have you come to the Lord on his terms? You cannot come if you say, “Lord, I am a good person. I don’t try to hurt anyone. I try to be a good son or daughter, a good father or mother, a good employee or employer, a good citizen. I am a nice guy. I deserve to be in heaven.” God is holy. He is pure. He is perfect. That is what he requires

of those who seek to come into his presence. Let me be frank: You have not made the grade. You are nowhere near that standard.

To come on God's terms you have to humble yourself and admit that you are a sinner. You have to be able to say from the heart and mean it, "Lord, I have not done my duty. I have done things that are wrong. I have said things that are wrong. I have thought things that are wrong. In fact, the problem is that there is something wrong with me deep down inside. I am concerned about myself instead of being concerned about you and about others. I don't need a quick fix. I need to have a new heart. One that works in the right way. One that wants to love you instead of one that wants only to love me.

And after admitting that you are a sinner you have to look to Jesus Christ and say, "God, I believe that Jesus is your Son. I believe he came from heaven to earth and lived a perfect life. And I believe he offered up his life at Calvary in my place. I believe he was punished in my place. I believe he died in my place. I believe in this way he took away all my sins so I can come into your presence and be received in mercy and in joy.

And after admitting your sin and looking to what Jesus did on the cross, you have to receive him as your Lord and Saviour. You have to say,

“Lord, I don’t know why you should love me enough to send your beloved Son Jesus to die for me, but I believe you did with all my heart. I receive Jesus as my Saviour and my Lord. Please come and live in my heart and give me the strength to turn away from my sins. More than that, give me the strength to live according to your commandments and to walk in a way that is pleasing to you. Let me live with faith, thanksgiving, obedience and love. Please let me be your child and let me live with you forever.

If you come to God in that way you will be received. You will be given eternal life and will know a peace that passes understanding. If you don’t, you will only know a terrible misery. But why wouldn’t you come? Jesus is a beautiful Saviour. In Christ’s name. AMEN.