



## Faith in Contrast – Hebrews 11:1-4, Genesis 4:1-16

WCP

### Intro

It's a phenomenon that shows up in all kinds of places: where you have two ostensibly identical things in front of you and yet - for some reason that you're not able to determine anyways - one just works/is effective/accepted and the other is not.

There's lots of different examples of this in life, but one that came to mind this past week as I was writing was **wedding engagements**. Now, I probably don't need to convince anybody in here that - for the most part - it's gonna be a tough sell for any of the ladies in here to get your husband/boyfriend/group of guys together to sit down for the evening and watch a show like "Wedding Stories" on HGTV with you; just not what a lot of men consider to be an enjoyable evening watching elaborate engagement proposals and passionate arguments about choosing the right fabric for bridesmaid dresses. But what you might possibly have at least a *bit* more luck with is getting him onto YouTube with you and watching wedding engagement fails; which are these collections of equally elaborate engagement proposals, but that end instead with nobody engaged/guy checking his receipt to see what the return policy is for engagement rings.

Now, I'm not sure why it is exactly that we find these stories more interesting than the successful ones, but here's why I bring it up: if you've seen at least one of each of these engagement stories (successful/not) over the course of your life, one of the things that will likely stand out to you – at least from our outside perspective anyways – is how remarkably similar they are; both had tried to create a romantic atmosphere/spent the recommended two month's salary on the engagement ring/gotten down on the exact same knee even, and yet – for reasons understandable only to the one being proposed to – one offering ends with tears and hugs and the other ends with tears from getting champagne thrown in their face, i.e. one is accepted and the other is rejected.

We're continuing in our new teaching series through Hebrews 11 this morning entitled "**By faith**" where, each week, we're looking at one of the numerous examples given there of men/women in the bible who faced seemingly impossible things through the course of their lives, and yet, were still successful in accomplishing them. And the hope I pray we find together in looking at these stories, is that we might be inspired/encouraged in whatever impossible things you might be facing today in your own life/collectively as a church. But – as I mentioned last week – rather than giving us a compendium of superheroes, what Hebrews 11 does instead is to offer us examples of men/women who are as weak/flawed as any of us, but who were *enabled* to accomplish those impossible things that they faced; and in each/every instance, the means by which they were enabled to face the impossible and make it possible, is faith/by faith.

Now, last week, we focused on **vs. 1** in particular where the author of Hebrews seeks to clearly define what he means by that word "faith"; today, we're going to focus primarily on **vs. 4** and what Hebrews 11 wants to teach us about living by faith through the story of Cain and



Abel found in **Genesis 4**; a story – as we just heard - that presents the very same phenomenon that we were just talking about, viz. contrasting two seemingly identical offerings by these brothers, but where only one offering is accepted and the other is rejected.

And we'll get into exactly *why* that was as we dig in here, but – big picture – the impossible thing that Hebrews 11 is presenting to us in our passage this morning, is the problem that has faced every single person since Adam and Eve, and that we absolutely *continue* to face today, viz. how can men/women who've been separated from a holy God by their sin be acceptable before Him? B/c – if you know the story immediately *before* Cain and Abel's in **Genesis 3** – you know that when their parents (Adam and Eve) rebelled against God's good rule and sinned, all of God's good creation (*including* humanity) became infected with sin's curse and – as a result – they were forced to leave the garden of Eden/cut off from the place where God's presence dwelled. And b/c of that, every single person *since* them has been both infected with the same curse *and* is also cut off from relationship with God as well.

And so, in order to see how Adam and Eve's younger son Abel was enabled to bridge that impossible gap between God and humanity, and how we can have hope to do the same ourselves, I want to look at our passage this morning in three ways. I want to talk about: **Faithful offering, Faithful mastery**, and then we'll close by looking at **Our Faithful Saviour. (x2)**

So, if you've closed your bibles, please open them again with me to those two passages in Hebrews 11/Genesis 4 – we're going to jump back and forth between them, and I want you to be able to follow along with me as we look at this contrasting example from Hebrews of what it means to live "by faith."

Ok, so let's look first of all at:

### **1. Faithful offering**

Now, before we can talk about why it is that Abel's offering was accepted by God and Cain's was not, we need to understand why it is they were bringing these offerings to God in the first place, right? B/c – and if you're relatively new to Christianity/just checking out what church is all about it's totally fine if you didn't know, but if you've been at this for a while now, it may have stood out to you as well - the whole sacrificial system/various kinds of offerings, etc. is not even instituted until way later in the book of Exodus.



And yet if you look at the storyline in **Gen. 4** we jump immediately from Adam and Eve getting kicked out of the garden in Gen. 3, to all of a sudden talking about Adam and Eve's two sons bringing these offerings to God based on their areas of work, with absolutely no mention whatsoever of either how they knew they were supposed to do that *or* what they hoped to accomplish by it. The *only* real indication we're given to answer either of those questions – in Genesis 4 anyways – is in God's interaction with Cain in **vss. 6-7** after his offering has been rejected and he's feeling all choked about it – look with me there. God says (**READ vss. 6-7a**). So we learn a lot from that actually, but – as it relates to the question at hand – we see at least three things:

- a) Either through their parents or from God Himself – there had been some kind of instructions given as to how these offerings were to be rightly performed; which is why God can encourage Cain to “do what is right” as it relates to his offering.
- b) Although *we're* not told how, somehow Cain and Able were able to clearly determine whether their offering had been accepted/not; we know this b/c *not* having his offering accepted is the stated reason for Cain's mood.
- c) The primary reason these offerings were being made was to be accepted by God.

So we know that much at least. And yet, again - as it relates to the problem we talked about as we began – when we just read about the offerings Cain and Abel brought in **vss. 3-4** – on the surface anyways – there doesn't seem to be any discernable reason *at all* as to why Abel's offering *would* be accepted by God in **vs. 4** but Cain's would be rejected in **vs. 5**.

Now, some commentators have suggested that the simple reason that God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's, is that Abel's offering included blood/life given while Cain's did not; but - if you look at the second half of **vs. 2** - it seems to indicate that the offerings they brought were based solely on their occupation, not on a prescribed offering of blood.

So what was the difference?! Well, if all we had to go on was what we can read in Genesis 4, I think we'd have a much harder time figuring out the answer. But, thankfully, we have **Hebrews 11:4** that tells us the answer, and which then also gives us an interpretive key for unlocking Genesis 4.

And, according to Hebrews 11, the key difference between the two offerings is simply this: faith. **Vs. 4** says (**READ vs. 4**). Now, again, this is where Hebrews is so helpful/doesn't leave us in the dark, b/c we have the definition of what he *means* when he says Abel offered God a better sacrifice “by faith” back in **vs. 1**. What is faith? Being sure/having confidence in what we hope for + being certain/having convicting proof of what we do not presently see. And what was it that Abel was hoping for/certain he could attain through his offering? Acceptance from God.

Take that understanding now and transfer it back onto **Genesis 4** and all of a sudden, differences that remained hidden before, suddenly begin to become visible. For if you look in **vs. 3** it says that Cain brought “*some of the fruits of the soil*” as his offering. And then in **vs. 4** the author of Genesis shows us two things: first of all, he says, “But” which should've already alerted us to the fact that he wants to make a contrast between two things; and then he tells us



that Abel brought *"fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock."* Now, even without knowing a thing about the significance of the firstborn in Jewish culture/history *or* the fact that the fat portions were the choicest of cuts/prime rib from an animal – *knowing* from Hebrews 11 that the confident hope of Abel's offering was that he might be accepted before God – are you beginning to see why Abel's offering was accepted by God while Cain's was not? Sure, Cain offered God *something* of what he had, but what we see in **vs. 4** is that what Abel brought was the *very best*/first fruits of what he had!

### App

And as we think about the offerings that you and I might want to make to God today, it's very easy to get confused by hearing a story like this and imagine that God just has really expensive tastes/that He must be like some snotty rich-girl who would only accept the offering of an engagement ring from Tiffany's, but would turn her nose up to one from Spence Diamonds. But that's to miss *entirely* the fact that – *well* beyond the gift itself – what is *truly* demonstrated by Abel's offering is the attitude of his heart towards the One he was making this offering to.

In **2 Samuel** we're told a story of an opportunity that King David had to be *given* a piece of property where God had told him to offer a sacrifice, instead of having to buy it from the owner. And in a similar act of faith/demonstrating the great value God had to him, David's response to the generosity of that land owner was still, *"No! I will not offer sacrifices to the LORD that cost me nothing."*

Contrast that, however, with what we read in **Luke 21** where Jesus is in the temple with His disciples, watching people give their offerings into the treasury. And where the rich are putting in these large offerings, a poor widow comes and puts in two small copper coins. And in response, Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave gifts out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."*

Which tells us what?

- a) God sees the true difference beneath otherwise identical looking offerings
- b) He isn't concerned *at all* about the size of the offering you make – whether of your finances/time/etc. – He's looking solely at the attitude of the heart behind the offering.

And what an offering made in faith – like Abel's, David's or this poor widow – demonstrates in the end is both your trust in God to continue to provide for your needs, as well as your humble recognition that everything you have is a gift from His hand to begin with.



So, an offering made like this in faith – whatever the size – according to our two passages, can allow us to accomplish the impossible, viz. for sinful men/women to be accepted before a holy God. And yet, with the contrast we have of Cain's offering, we see that there's also something that can devour that faith that makes our offerings acceptable, and *us* along with it; something God tells Cain he must gain **mastery**/control over before it destroys him. And if it could rob Cain's offerings of faith/blow up his whole world – as we see it clearly did in Genesis 4 – then there's nothing to say that it couldn't also do the same in our lives today. So, that's the next thing we'll look at together:

## 2. **Faithful mastery**

And we see the answer to what that faith devouring/life destroying thing is in **Genesis 4:6-7** – look with me there. Again, Cain is very angry/depressed b/c God has accepted Abel and his offering but rejected him and his. And God's response is to say (**READ vss. 6-7**).

So, very clearly, God tells Cain that **sin** is the thing that is draining all the faith out of his offerings and leaving him on the outside looking in as it relates to acceptance from Him. But beyond that, God also describes that sin in this very vivid imagery of a predator crouching right outside the door waiting to devour him. You see God says (**READ vs. 7b**).

I don't know if you've ever watched a lion/tiger/house cat even as they're hunting before; but if you have, you'll know that they don't just run up to the animal they're trying to eat; they stalk their prey in order to both gain the element of surprise as well as to try and get so close that – even if their prey *does* notice them eventually – they'll have no hope of escape. And the way you often see them stalking their prey is exactly like this: they *crouch down* as low to the ground as possible in order to remain un-noticed for as long as possible.

Which, of course, is powerfully descriptive of how sin operates in all of our lives, isn't it; never revealing itself fully as what it is, but *crouching*/seeking to remain hidden behind seemingly innocuous smaller temptations for as long as possible until – at last – we've allowed it so close that we have no hope of escape. Which is why it's often said that nobody ever just wakes up one morning and decides to cheat on their spouse/embezzle thousands of dollars from their company/etc. – it's *always* the result of a series of smaller, seemingly harmless steps that then lead them up to the place where escape no longer seems possible.

But what's even more incredible about what God says to Cain here is that – along with describing for him exactly how his offerings *could* still be accepted – like Jesus describing Judas' betrayal to him *as* he sat with Jesus at the last supper – God also knows what is in Cain's heart to kill his brother, and is offering him one last chance to change his course/repent; do you see: he says, "Sin is so close to devouring you right now, it's crouching right outside your door; *it desires to have you, but you must master it.*"

## **App**

The Hebrew word God uses there for "master" has the sense of authority/ruling over something. Which means – and this should be incredibly encouraging for us to hear – what God is clearly telling us here is that - by faith - we also have the ability to overcome any sin in our



lives, no matter what it is/how close we've come to allowing it to destroy us; which means we can turn around and battle sin with the very same faith it's seeking to steal from us.

In **James 4:7** Jesus' half-brother tells us plainly, "*Submit yourselves to God; resist the Devil and he will flee from you.*" In **Romans 8:13** the apostle Paul tells us, "*For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.*"

Which means that whatever sin you're facing today/maybe you've even been facing for years, and you feel like no matter how hard you've tried, it is impossible to overcome; God's word tells you here that by faith: confident trust that God is *able* to free you from those chains/certainly that He *will* free you even if you can't see it yet, you *too* can have mastery over that sin; not because you're so strong, but b/c He is!

And if that's where you're at this morning; feeling trapped/chained by your sin, two ways that we can begin to demonstrate that faith in God's ability to free us are:

- Confession to God: **1 John 1:9** tells us that, "if we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Confession - the way John is using it here – also includes the idea of acknowledgment. So we come humbly to God in prayer/masks off/games stopped and say something like, "God I know I don't just have an impatience problem, I have an anger problem; I know I don't just have a "wandering eye" I have a lust problem; I know I don't just have a cautious nature, I don't trust that you're good/really have my best interests in mind." *Acknowledge* your sin to God and then seek His help to put those sins to death.
- Confession to others: in **James 5:16** we're told, "*Confess your sins to each other and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man [i.e. the one who's gained acceptance from God by faith] has great power to prevail.*" This is about seeking accountability from other Christians who are on the same God-ward trajectory as you and who can support/stand beside you; who can offer you an outside perspective when sin is about to pounce, but it's crouching behind the door and you can't see it.

And when you demonstrate your faith in God's ability like this, the promise of God's word is that you truly can have mastery over that sin that feels otherwise impossible to overcome.



## Conclusion

And yet, as great as that all might sound, I know for some of us here this morning, our response would still be to say, “Yeah, that sounds amazing. I sure wish someone could have told me that 10 years ago/7 months ago/etc. B/c you see for me it’s too late now; I’ve already taken all the little steps I wasn’t supposed to take, and then I swung that door wide open; and now I *know* that sin has devoured me/my life is completely blown up; I see it everywhere I look now including in the mirror.”

If that’s where you’re at this morning – as I often say – I’d invite you to keep reading with me, as God’s word shows us **our faithful Saviour** – and we’ll close with this. B/c if you look at Cain, you see that in the *very next verse*, it’s as if God hadn’t even said a thing to him; he invites his brother out into a field and – with most wicked speed – he kills his own brother.

Now, what should God’s response be to someone who has so obviously failed/clearly ignored His repeated, gracious warnings and murdered his own brother? Shouldn’t he end his life here and now on the spot? Shouldn’t God carry out immediate justice against the blood of Abel that cried out to Him from the very ground which soaked up his innocent blood? The answer, of course, is yes He *should*.

And yet, the more you read this book and understand the God revealed inside, the more you see that the storyline of the whole bible is one of grace instead of judgement; mercy instead of justice.

For if the blood of Abel/killed without cause cried out for justice, how much more does the blood of the truly innocent Son of God put to death on a Roman cross cry out for justice. And yet in the very next chapter of Hebrews, we read that by turning to God in faith, we don’t come to a place of judgement; he says, *“You have come to Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”*

How is it a better word? B/c the good news of the bible is that in sending Jesus/promised Rescuer to die in our place – rather than ignoring/passing over the justice our sins required – God, in Jesus, made the just payment in full *for us* so that we wouldn’t have to bear it; and where Abel’s blood cries out only for justice, now the blood of Jesus shed for us cries out instead for mercy/grace.

You see this exemplified in the book of Exodus when God warns of His coming judgement on the Egyptians where the angel of death will come and kill every firstborn son. And the way God’s people are told they can avoid this coming judgement is to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a spotless lamb; a sign that signifies their faith in God to deliver them from this judgement.

And if you look at God’s response to Cain’s pitiful cry for mercy in **Genesis 4:15** after he’s failed to master the sin in his heart and killed his brother, you see that where justice is undoubtedly deserved, God marks Cain instead with a sign that covers him with protection from the punishment his sin deserves. I love what **Derek Kidner** writes about this in his commentary on Genesis, stating that in this act what we’re shown is that, *“God’s concern for*



*the innocent (10) is matched only by His care for the sinner. And God's answering pledge, together with His mark or sign, is almost a covenant making Him virtually Cain's protector."*

If you're here this morning, feeling like you're sin has devoured you/you're now beyond the reach of God's help anymore; my prayer for you is that - by faith – you would allow the blood of the truly innocent Son of God shed in your place to speak a better word than the blood of Abel over you; offering you life in place of death/mercy in the place of justice.

Let's pray.