

# Cain and Abel

By Elder David Pyles

When the Bible presents us with a thing for the very first time, it has a tendency to convey important principles that will pertain throughout the book concerning such things. Bible students will sometimes speak of a “rule of first use” in reference to this tendency. In the fourth chapter of Genesis, we have some very important first occurrences. In the wicked man Cain, we have the first man born into this world that we can prove to be an unregenerate, unsaved man. John plainly tells us that Cain was “*of that wicked one,*” (1Jn 3:12). In Abel we have the first man born into this world that we can prove to be a regenerate, saved man. Paul said, “*By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous,*” (Heb 11:4). Jesus Christ also referred to him as “*righteous Abel*” (Mt 23:35). In presenting the story of Cain and Abel, the Bible will establish several principles that will prove important throughout the book. Indeed, the Bible strongly intimates this fact because Paul said of Abel that “*he being dead yet speaketh,*” (Heb 11:4). It is obviously important to understand exactly what is spoken by the story of Abel today.

The Bible says these two men individually made offerings to God but of different types. Cain’s offering was of the fruit of the ground, but Abel’s offering was an animal from his flock. God had very different reactions to these offerings, as is stated in: “*And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect,*” (Gn 4:4-5). Many years later, Paul advanced our understanding of this event when he explained that “*by **faith** Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain,*” (Heb 11:4). So we can confidently say that the difference was ultimately rooted in faith, but faith is itself a profound subject, and Paul’s explanation may have created as many questions as it answered. There is obviously still much more to consider.

Some have speculated that God had given these men or their parents specifications concerning offerings and that Abel obeyed those specifications whereas Cain did not. This purportedly

explains why God respected one offering but not the other. A simple explanation like this would be appealing if it worked, but there are in fact multiple reasons why it does not: The first is that the Bible says nothing to support it. Nothing was said here or elsewhere about God having given some protocol for offerings. The second problem is that when God did actually give protocol many years later in the book of Leviticus, both types of offerings were deemed admissible. The third problem is that the explanation ignores the fact that God's respect was unto Abel's offering *and* to Abel himself, and that God's disrespect was unto Cain's offering *and* to Cain himself. The explanation narrowly focuses on the difference in the offerings and disregards the difference that God saw in the men who made the offerings. The fourth problem may be the greatest of all: If the difference were merely one of procedure, then the whole matter would become one of *legal compliance*, which is a very different thing than a matter of *faith* (Gal 3:12).

All agree that faith is a thing of the heart, so the real difference between these two offerings must ultimately trace to the contents of the heart and not the contents of the hand. This is not to say that the substance of the offerings was of no importance because God's respect and disrespect were directed not only at the men themselves but at the offerings they made. However, this is a case where even the difference in the hand was owing to a difference in the heart. Abel was acting on his heart when he chose his superior offering. This must be true because "*by faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.*"

These facts establish for us important principles that will carry throughout the word of God. They are that regenerate men and unregenerate men are alike with respect to their natural origin, and alike in that both die, and alike in that both err, and are also alike in that both can practice a religion, but the Bible says they are radically different in the heart, and this difference manifests itself in what they believe, and what they believe manifests itself in the religion they practice.

We have also another principle in this story that actually corrects the thinking of many modern Christians. Their theory is that faith is altogether produced by means of scriptural truth being presented to the natural mind. This idea is extorted from Romans 10:17,

which says, “*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*” Misuse of the scripture is very common. It is interpreted in disregard to several other scriptures that actually present faith as being *prerequisite* to hearing. That is, a man will not hear the word of God unless he *already* has faith (Rom 1:16-17, 2Thes 3:1-2, Heb 4:2). It is of course not for us to pit one scripture against another, but to seek out an interpretation that reconciles both. Now the case of Abel plainly exposes the error of the common theory. His faith did not come from hearing or reading any inspired text because there was no such text for him to hear or read. Nor do the scriptures speak of any verbal statement of God that Abel might have believed and his brother disbelieved. Indeed, the first portrayed as believing God was actually Cain, who fearfully believed every word when God warned him of the consequences of his sin. The best explanation is that Abel’s faith was not in reaction to external information, but was put directly into his heart by God. Being moved by such faith, Abel chose, either wittingly or instinctively, an offering that portended the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and this is why God respected it.

When the scriptures speak of “faith” they may be referring either to a capacity or to the exercise of that capacity. To illustrate, a man may enhance his appetite by hard work, sports, etc., but his basic capacity for appetite was endowed to him by natural birth. A man may also enhance his mental acuity by study, memorization, etc., but in all this he exercises a capacity that was freely given him when he was born, and without such capacity, he would never be able to study or memorize anything. Accordingly, a man in believing on Jesus Christ exercises a capacity that was freely endowed to him in the spiritual birth. When the scriptures speak of “faith,” they may refer either to the capacity or to the exercise of that capacity. Now when a man is naturally born, he will be endowed with a hand with which he can grasp an object, but obviously he will grasp nothing until an object has been presented to his hand. Even so, when a man is born of the Spirit, he is endowed with a heart having capacity and predisposition to grasp the truth of the gospel, but obviously he will not grasp that truth if he has never heard it. This is what the Apostle meant when he said “*faith cometh by hearing.*” It cannot be *exercised* without being presented with truth to embrace, and therefore cannot be *manifested* without such truth, but there is a very real sense in

which faith must exist even before hearing, and Abel is case in point.

The next principle to be learned from the story of Cain and Abel is conveyed in Paul's claim that by faith Abel "*obtained witness that he was righteous,*" (Heb 11:4). Hence, his faith was not a cause of his righteousness, nor was it a means unto his righteousness; rather, it was a *witness* of it. Such is the case with us also, and we can rejoice in the fact that faith is a powerful and conclusive witness. Jesus said, "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath (not "shall get") everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life,*" (Jn 5:24). Accordingly, the Bible will later teach that Jesus Christ alone is the cause and the means of our freely-given righteousness before God, but that our faith in Christ is what certifies the fact. This is the correct meaning of the expression "justification by faith." We were rendered righteous by the death of Christ alone but our faith in Him declares it to be so.

Next, the Bible explains that Cain became very wroth when his offering was deemed inferior to that of Abel. The Lord then admonished him with the following important words:

*Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. – Gn 4:6-7*

Now to a man having faith, the terms here presented to Cain will seem disastrous, but to a faithless man like Cain, the terms will seem quite satisfactory. Even though men of faith sincerely aspire to live in obedience, they nonetheless cast themselves upon the mercy of God, not wishing to be judged on the basis of their imperfect works and religiosity. However, men without faith have a very different perspective. Though they tend to live in disobedience, they have misplaced confidence in themselves and a deluded sense of their own righteousness, and on such account, they are quite willing to be judged on the basis of their works and their self-contrived religious practices. The proof of this is irrefutable. Such men have been inventing gods and religions from the beginning of time, and have hatched up more of them than one can count, yet in all these religions, salvation is vainly imagined as

deriving from works or from the practice of religious ritual. So the works-based system that God presented here to Cain is exactly what such a man would want, and this is why the Lord told him he had no reason to complain.

The Lord then established another important principle when He said, “*And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.*” These words refer to Abel, and the meaning was that, notwithstanding the superiority of Abel’s offering, Cain would still have right of primogeniture, having been the firstborn. In short, God was leaving Cain in charge, and Cain and his kind have been in charge of this world ever since. They will remain in charge until Jesus returns. While there are occasional happy exceptions to this rule, the clear tendency of history has been that wicked, faithless men have ruled over the earth. God’s children had best take note of this fact lest they become naïve in their expectations and disheartened when confronted with reality. So we see that God not only gave Cain the religious terms that such a carnal man would wish to have, but also left him in charge, thus further showing that he had no reason to complain.

Now one would think that carnal men would consider it sufficient to be in possession of authority and power, particularly after God had commanded their spiritual brothers to be in submission to them, pay to them taxes, etc., but the story of Cain and Abel shows otherwise. Cain was not content until he had destroyed his brother. Even so, the wicked men he portended will find no satisfaction in power alone, but their peace can come only with the destruction of their spiritual brothers and the destruction of the true religion they profess. Such has been the case over history and will remain the case until Jesus returns.

We then read of how God put a mark on Cain lest any man take vengeance against him for his ignominious distinction of being the world’s first murderer. In this we learn that carnal men can actually receive more clemency from God in this life than others. Indeed, one of the Psalms said concerning the wicked: “*They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men,*” (Ps 73:5). This is because God chastens His own children for sins that others seem to commit with impunity. Paul explained, “*But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world,*” (1Cor 11:32). Such is

corroborated by another Psalm: *“Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of thy law; That thou mayest give him rest from the days of adversity, until the pit be digged for the wicked,”* (Ps 94:12-13). And Christ Himself said, *“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent,”* (Rev 3:19). This also establishes the important principle that a distinction must be made between God’s treatment of people in time and His treatment of them in eternity.

Accordingly, when the Bible speaks of salvation or condemnation, context must always be examined to determine the relevant domain, whether it is in time or in eternity. Cain was pardoned in time but not in eternity. Abel is saved in eternity but was murdered in time.

After God gave immunity to Cain, we find that one of his wicked descendants named Lamech also murdered a man and impudently declared his own impunity on the basis of what had been done to Cain (4:23-24). Only two chapters later in the flood account, we find the entire world being plunged into violence, possibly because this same mindset had become common among wicked men. In this we have another principle that will hold throughout the Bible: When carnal men are shown mercy by God, they will pervert it into cause for complacency and reason for rebellion (Jude 4), but when spiritual men are shown the same mercy, they will spend the remainder of their days singing praise to God for it, joyously preaching it, and assembling with others of like kind to worship Him for His kindness and grace. These radically different reactions derive from radically different hearts – a difference that was first observed in Cain and Abel. Christ Himself emphasized this difference of heart in:

*Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. – Mt 12:33-35*

Finally, after Cain had murdered Abel, God said to him, *“What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground,”* (Gn 4:10). This will be the first mention of

blood in the Bible, and the significance of the event will be elsewhere noted in scripture (Mt 23:35, Heb 12:24). Some interpret Abel's blood as crying merely for justice, but execution of justice is of no benefit to a man who is already dead. The blood of Abel cries for *resurrection* as well as justice, and the fact that God's ear is sensitive to such a cry is the most important principle in the story of Cain and Abel. It is a principle that sets the stage for much better things to come in the Bible, namely, the uplifting and inspiring gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.