

PRESENTING OURSELVES TO GOD



Hebrews 11:4

32nd Message

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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Last week we began looking at Hebrews 11, the famous chapter about faith. It is often called the Hall of Faith, for it features many OT people who lived by faith. Eighteen times in the chapter a new sentence begins, “By faith.” Most Christians know that Father Abraham is the Father of Faith. Faith begins with him. The Lord made him a promise:

He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:5-6)

Here we have the first occurrence of two important words: *believe* and *righteousness*. They are connected. God spoke: he made a promise concerning the future. Abram responded in faith: he trusted that God and his word were reliable. God responded in turn to Abram’s trust by deeming it to be righteousness: Abram’s response of trust was the appropriate response within their relationship. Both faith and righteousness are relational terms.

At the end of the previous chapter of Hebrews the preacher has used two related words from another OT verse: “But my righteous one will live by faith” (Heb 10:38), quoting Hab 2:4. Here it is the other way around: the righteous live by faith. Right-relatedness to God is worked out in an ongoing life of faith and faithfulness. Again this is relational.

Both verses are central to the idea of justification by faith, where *justification* and *righteousness* represent the same word group. I mentioned last week that October 31 was Reformation Day, in commemoration of Martin Luther nailing his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This was the spark that ignited the Reformation, though that was not Luther’s original intent. Central to Reformation doctrine is *justification by faith*: God *justifies* those who have *faith*; he considers *righteous* those who *believe*.

It is all to easy to think of these two words in abstract terms. By faith we believe in a set of abstract truths and doctrines. Then justification or righteousness is some abstract status that God gives us. But this is not how the terms are used in Scripture.

Faith and righteousness began with Abraham. The apostle Paul devotes a whole chapter of Romans—chapter 4—to the justifying faith of Abraham and our call to be like Abraham for he is “the father of all who believe” (4:11), both Jew and Gentile. He is “our father Abraham” (4:12).

So surely a chapter devoted to the OT people who lived *by faith* would begin with Abraham, the father of faith. He was the one whom God called by grace to start a new people, a people who would live by faith. But the preacher begins his gallery of faith not with Abraham, but with three people who preceded Abraham by many generations: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. But if the preacher goes that far back, all the way to Abel, why not begin with Adam?

Let us consider Adam’s situation. He lived primarily by sight not by faith. The preacher has stated that “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (11:1). But Adam didn’t have much to hope for—in his case that was not a bad thing. Nor was there much that he did not experience directly through his senses. He lived primarily by sight.

The Lord God planted a garden and provided it with streams of water. He caused an abundance of trees to grow, yielding much fruit for eating. He spoke directly to Adam, telling him to eat of any tree in the garden. These were “pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Gen 2:9). They were visible. They were all in the realm of what could be seen. And God’s word could be heard aurally, with the physical ear. Adam didn’t have to labor for his food. God did all the work. He provided Adam’s needs and did so in abundance.

The Lord did speak one word that did require faith: do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Like all other trees, this one was good to look at and good for food. But God said it was off-limits lest the one eating die. This called for faith on Adam’s part because the consequences were in the unseen future. Adam had to believe this; he had to believe God and his word.

This one prohibition was given in an environment of present abundance. But the serpent questioned God’s provision. He focused the woman’s attention on the one fruit denied: the tree in the middle of the garden. She saw that in addition to being “good for food and pleasing to the eye,” it was “desirable for gaining wisdom.” The serpent so focused her attention on what she lacked that she lost sight of what she already had. He changed her perceived environment from one of *abundance* to one of *scarcity*. He placed the one thing she lacked into the center of her imagination. He cultivated her desire for what she did not have. Her sight overrode her faith. She lived in the present with no eye to the future. She lost faith in God’s word and God’s provision. She fell into unbelief and disobedience.

Much later this would be replicated by the wilderness generation that God brought out of Egypt. They too lost faith in God’s provision. They too saw themselves in an environment of scarcity. They too fell into unbelief and disobedience. They failed to enter into God’s rest. The preacher warns his readers to not be like them (Hebrews 3-4). The Hall of Faith in chapter 11 is the positive counterpart against the negative example of the wilderness generation.

The Lord God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden. Now they would have to labor for their own provision. The cursed ground would yield thorns and thistles on which goats and sheep could graze. Here we have to put out of mind the image of sheep safely grazing in a lush, bucolic English pasture beside a soothing river. Through painful toil and the sweat of his brow, Adam could get the ground to produce grain: wheat and barley.

Civilization began with the domestication of plants and animals in the Neolithic Revolution some 12,000 years ago. Ancient historians view this as a good thing, as significant progress. Genesis views it as less than good, less than ideal. It was after expulsion from God’s

provision due to lack of faith. This was the world into which Cain and Abel were born.

So we come to Abel, the first person in the Hall of Faith:

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. (Heb 11:4 NIV)

Cain and Abel: their names are famous. Their lack of brotherly love is infamous. Their names belong together, but they didn't belong together. Both names are given here, literally alongside each other. There is a wordplay that cannot be captured in English. Very woodenly the Greek reads "By faith, a better offering Abel alongside Cain presented to God." Abel alongside Cain. This is how Genesis 4 carefully presents the two brothers, interleaving their names: Cain–Abel, Abel–Cain, back and forth. They were alongside one another in their birth, in their labor, in their approach to God, and in God's evaluation (Gen 4:1–5). In each case the verb is repeated for the two brothers.

Adam lay with Eve and she conceived. She birthed *Cain*, and again she birthed *Abel*. There is no mention of a second conception, only a second birth, so they may well be twins. The narrative works best if we view them as twins. *Abel* was a keeper of sheep (and/or goats) and *Cain* was a worker of the ground. Again, side by side: the first shepherd and the first farmer. Both occupations were equally valid east of Eden.

At the end of the agricultural year *Cain* brought an offering to the Lord, and *Abel* brought, he also. Their labor had been successful. They both recognized it was appropriate to draw near to God and bring him some of the produce of their labors. The offering is a *minhah*. We can think of this as a tribute offering from a lesser to a greater, whether to a superior human or to a deity. This was appropriate. They were acknowledging God, attributing their success to him, and returning something to him. The Greek Septuagint translates it as a *thusia*, often translated as a sacrifice. It is often thought that a sacrifice means the killing of an animal, but this word simply means something presented to a deity, i.e. an offering, a tribute.

But now we do get a slight differentiation. *Cain* brought some of the fruit of the ground; there is no mention of him bringing the firstfruits. *Abel* brought some of the firstborn of his flock and their fatty portions.

The fourth and final stage is God's response to these offerings. The Lord looked with favor on *Abel* and his tribute offering, but on *Cain* and his tribute offering he did not look with favor.

By faith Abel brought a better offering than Cain. Why was it better? Many think it was better because Abel brought a blood sacrifice, whereas Cain brought a non-blood sacrifice. Or, more particularly, Abel brought a lamb that was sacrificed. Many sermons have been preached on this basis. Many such sermons conclude by drawing a line from Abel and his sacrificial lamb to Jesus, the lamb of God, who was sacrificed for us and our sins. These make very stirring sermons, but I don't think they are true to the text.

The *minhah* offering they brought was not a sacrifice. It was a tribute. It was entirely appropriate to bring of their own produce. Cain was a farmer, so he brought grain. Abel was a shepherd, so he brought newborn sheep or goats. But there are two reasons why Abel's offering was better.

The first reason was the *offering* itself. Abel specifically brought

some of the firstborn of his flock, and, even more specifically, of their fatty portions. In our health-conscious age we trim off the fatty portions and throw them away. But I remember as a child relishing the fat portion, especially of a pork chop. In some parts of the world today the honored guests at a feast will be served the fat portion—Sue and I have been so honored in Indonesia. So, the first reason Abel's offering was better was the offering itself: he brought the best portion of his increase.

The second reason was the *offerer*. The Lord looked with favor or disfavor upon both the offering and the offeror. He looked with favor upon Abel. Abel had approached the Lord with the right attitude. His offering was the external manifestation of an internal state of mind and heart. Abel brought himself and presented himself to God. In giving his best he showed that he was living in a world of abundance and gratitude. He opened his arms to give his offering and himself to God. He emptied himself of self to focus on God. Or rather, he found his true self in relation to God.

Cain, though, lived in a world of scarcity. He may have had abundant crops, but he held on to the best for himself. His gratitude was limited. He did not present his whole self before God. Self intruded and self consumed him. One can almost hear Gollum saying, "It's mine, precious!"

The drama of this scene is brilliantly captured by Annie Valloton, the Swiss artist who drew the many line drawings for the *Good News Bible*. I grew up with these drawings! In the background stands Abel beside his altar, gazing up into heaven with his eyes on the Lord. God is in the realm of the things that cannot be seen, but he can be seen by faith. Abel's outstretched hands express his surrender to the Lord. In the foreground stands Cain beside his altar. His arms are folded in on himself, his eyes are on his brother, and his face wears a thick scowl.

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain. By this faith he was attested to be righteous. Just as in v. 2 we have a divine passive: he was attested, with God as the implicit subject. God testified that Abel was righteous, that he was acting in right relationship with God, he was rightly relating to God. Genesis does not use either *faith* or *righteous* word-groups for Abel. But it is clear that both terms are appropriate for Abel. By faith he brought himself and his better offering, presenting both to God. God accepted both as evidence of right-relatedness. Abel is mentioned several times in the NT, usually with the epithet *righteous*. We read of "the blood of righteous Abel" (Matt 23:35), and of Abel's righteous deeds (1 John 3:12).

God looked with favor on both Abel and his offering. He was well-pleased with Abel. Again, both *faith* and *righteousness* are relational terms. Abel trusted God and entrusted himself to God in a bidirectional relationship mediated by his offering. This was not true for Cain.

In v. 6 the preacher writes,

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (11:6)

I will look at the first half of this verse next week in conjunction with Enoch (v. 5). The second half applies to v. 4. The one who approaches God must do so in faith. There are two objects of this faith. He must believe that God exists, that he is there even though he cannot be seen. And he must believe that God rewards those who earnestly seek him, that there will be something in the future that cannot yet be seen. In both cases, faith is oriented to the realm that

cannot be seen, whether in the present or in the future.

The preacher began this chapter: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (11:1). There are things in the present that we do not see because our physical senses cannot penetrate the unseen realm. And there are things in the future that we do not see because they have not yet happened. God exists in the realm which we cannot see. Or rather, God has always existed, and now exists over, in, and throughout his creation, only part of which is visible. God himself we do not see. But faith is the assurance that he is there. Therefore he can be approached. He wants us humans, living east of Eden, to seek after him, and to do so earnestly. He allows himself to be found. Indeed, he wants to be found. He will be found by those who seek him.

Through his prophet Jeremiah, the Lord said to the exiles in Babylon: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you” (Jer 29:13-14). Our call to worship was from Psalm 63, written by David in the wilderness: “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you” (Ps 63:1). We believe that God exists and so we seek him. We approach him.

Secondly, we believe that God “rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Here we have to be very careful. In bringing our gifts to God we can too easily have our own mind made up as to how we expect him to reward us. Our gift may not actually be a gift if we have the wrong motives and expectations. If we are expecting the wrong reciprocity, a gift may be a bribe, or a shake-down, or greasing the palm. There are all sorts of wrong motives for giving. Let me illustrate with a modern parable, told by Tim Keller:

Once upon a time a gardener grew an enormous carrot. He presented it to the king, saying, “This is the best carrot I’ll ever grow; I give it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” He turned to leave. But the king discerned the man’s heart and said, “I own the land next to yours; I’ll give it to you to garden as well.” One of the king’s nobles saw this and thought he could do better. The next day he brought the king a beautiful horse, saying, “This is the best horse I’ll ever raise; I give it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” The king discerned his heart, thanked him, took the horse and dismissed him. When the noble was perplexed the king said, “The gardener was giving *me* the carrot, but you were giving *yourself* the horse.”¹

The Greek translation (Septuagint) of Genesis makes a subtle change. When God evaluated Abel and his offering, the Hebrew word for *tribute offering* is changed to Greek plural *gifts*. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his *gifts*. Cain’s offering is left as a tribute, as if to state that he really wasn’t bringing a gift. I think the translators were on to something important here in the dynamic of how the brothers, side-by-side, approached God. The writer to the Hebrews, like the other NT authors, followed the Greek OT: God testified about Abel’s *gifts*. Confusingly, NIV, unlike the other versions, has translated this as *offerings*, not *gifts*.

God rewards those who seek him. But Abel died. Not only that, he was murdered by his brother. He was killed while being faithful. He was killed for being faithful, for his faithfulness showed up the unfaithfulness of Cain. He was the first martyr. God rewards those who seek him. The first three people in this Hall of Faith sought God; they oriented their lives onto God. They lived by faith, but they had very different outcomes. Abel lived by faith, and he died, killed by his brother. Enoch lived by faith, and he did not die; he was taken by God. Noah lived by faith, and everyone else died. Make

sense of that!

Abel is dead, yet Abel still speaks. How can a dead person speak? Abel didn’t even speak in life. In Genesis 4 he never speaks. Seven times it is stated that Abel is Cain’s brother, but never that Cain is Abel’s brother. It’s as if Abel doesn’t really have a brother. Abel has a very light presence in the account. He is the subject of only two verbs: he was a keeper of flocks, and he brought an offering. Cain’s name is explained in the first verse. Abel’s name is not explained, though his name is given seven times. The meaning is left for us the reader to infer. His name is *Hevel*, the word used repeatedly in Ecclesiastes, translated as *vanity*, *futility*, or *meaningless*. It means a transitory puff of wind or breath. It’s here, then it’s quickly gone. Such was Abel’s life. Here, then suddenly gone.

But Abel’s voice has been crying out ever since. The Lord said to Cain, “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground.” It is crying out for justice, for this was innocent blood that was shed. We might easily jump to thinking of this as retributive justice: Cain needs to be held accountable for his actions. But that would just leave two people dead. True justice is restorative. Restorative justice for Abel ultimately requires resurrection.

God engaged Cain in dialog. He invited Cain into relationship, relationship into which he had not entered with his tribute offering. But this invitation into relationality was oppressive for Cain. He kept pushing God away, until ultimately he went out from the Lord’s presence. He went into voluntary, self-imposed exile, and lived in the land of Nod. That’s an oxymoron, for Nod means *wandering*. Cain settled down in the land of wandering. He went away from God. Here he lived a self-oriented life. Here he built a city. An ancient city had two things: a king and a wall. So here in the city of his own making Cain could reign as king behind his own defences.

God continues to hear the voice of Abel’s blood. He invites people to come out of exile and draw near to him. So the preacher writes, “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” (12:24). What better word is the sprinkled blood of Jesus speaking? He too was killed for his faithful witness. He was the supreme martyr. The eternal Son became human, like us in every way, sharing our flesh and blood. He was tested and tempted in every way, like us, but without sin. He was faithful unto death. God has raised him into a new creation body, filled with indestructible life. He has passed through the heavens into God’s presence. There he has presented himself and his blood before God. This blood is far more powerful than the blood presented by the Levitical priests, who regularly approached God with their gifts and their offerings. This blood cleanses and purifies from all sin. It seals a new covenant, resulting in the forgiveness of sins. No matter how terrible those sins are. The blood of Jesus says, “Father, forgive.” The blood of Jesus is restorative. The blood of Jesus is the ultimate answer to the cry of Abel’s blood.

Because we have such a great high priest, we are invited to draw near to God, just as Abel drew near to God; just as the Levitical priests drew near to God. We don’t have to bring an offering, because Jesus has brought the perfect offering. He has brought himself and his blood.

God is now approachable through Jesus. We have access into his presence. God bids us seek him earnestly. He will be found when we seek him through Jesus by his Spirit. So, in the Book of Hebrews, on either side of the great central section about the high-priesthood of Jesus, there is an invitation to draw near to God, to draw near to the

throne of grace (4:14-16; 10:19-22). God wants us to approach him, to come to him. He wants us to give ourselves to him. He will then reward us with the gift of himself, the gift of life, and the gift of making it to the end of our journey. We shall come to the New Jerusalem, the celestial city, where God himself is. There our faith shall become sight.

Cain and Abel represent two ways of living life: in relation to God and in relation to self.

One way of living is that modeled by Cain. Augustine introduced the phrase, *Homo incurvatus in se*, man curved in on himself. This was how Cain lived; he was oriented onto self. But self is a petty thing to be preoccupied with. Cain lived in a world of scarcity. He kept for himself both his goods and himself.

The other way of living life is other-centered. It is *excavatus ex se*,

curved outwards from self. Outwards towards God and towards others. This was Abel. He was oriented onto God. He lived in a world of abundance, and so he could freely give. He could give the best of what he had, the best of the yield of his flock. He could give himself as he presented himself to God. Though he died, though he was murdered, though he was martyred, yet his voice continued to speak. Abel lived by faith and God testified that he was righteous. He was in right relationship to God. Abel is a worthy first member of this Hall of Faith.

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1. Abbreviated from Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 60-62.