

## "A more excellent sacrifice."

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All that we know of Abel is compressed into a few verses in Genesis 4, supplemented by one verse in Hebrews 11. His name is mentioned in a few other verses of the New Testament, but not in a way that adds anything to our knowledge of him. The facts concerning him are given in Genesis, and then Hebrews 11: 4 illumines the facts, making clear their deep significance.

We might almost have written *fact*, rather than facts. We are told that he was "a keeper of sheep," but this merely makes it certain that when he brought as an offering "the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof," it was an offering of lambs. We are also told that "the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering," and this shows that he and his offering were accepted in the sight of God. The central fact is that he found the way of acceptable approach to God by means of a sacrifice, which involved the death of the victim. He was the first man to die, yet, because his act set forth the true ground of approach to God, his name is still remembered and his voice is still heard.

Cain's offering and his hatred, culminating in murder, furnish a dark background to the picture, against which Abel's sacrifice stands out the more clearly. Cain brought his offering on rational and natural grounds. His father Adam had been driven forth from Eden "to till the ground from whence he was taken," and of the two brothers Cain was the one to follow this out, for he "was a tiller of the ground." In this he was quite unimpeachable, but, in assuming that God would be pleased with an offering of some of the fruits of his tillage, he evidently forgot that the ground had been cursed, and that he himself was under the sentence of death, and that no fruit of the labour of his hands, not even the best could lift that weighty sentence and put him right with God. Since God paid no attention whatever to his offering, he found himself rejected.

The excellence of Abel's sacrifice lay in the fact that it was of such a nature as to acknowledge his own place as a sinner before God under sentence of death. He did not bring the firstlings of his flock alive, as is shown by the words which follow, "and of the fat thereof." Read these words in the light of such a verse as Numbers 18: 17, and the significance of them is clear. By bringing an offering of this character Abel owned the truth as to himself and took his true place before God. He did in principle what the publican did, as related by the Lord in Luke 18: 13, and the same happy result followed in both cases.

And further, the greater excellence of his sacrifice is seen in this: it was the first clear foreshadowing and type of the death of Christ. We say, *clear*, because there was a dim announcement of His death in the words of the Lord God, as to the bruising of the heel of the woman's seed, and a dim type in the clothing of Adam and Eve in the coats of skins. Now however what was involved in these two things comes clearly into view, and there can be no mistaking the fact that Abel's slain lambs, with their fat offered to God, pointed on to the great sacrifice of Calvary. The excellence of a calm full moon in winter is borrowed from the sun, which is for the moment invisible to us, so the excellence of Abel's sacrifice was largely attributable to the fact that at the dawn of the world's history it was radiating the light of the far-distant sacrifice of Jesus, which was yet to come.

Consequently, in Abel's sacrifice God found pleasure. Finding pleasure in his gifts, He testified to His acceptance of them in no uncertain way. Genesis tells us that God "had respect to" his offering, and Hebrews states that God testified "of his gifts," but in neither place are we told how God rendered this

testimony. It may have been by fire from heaven, as on other occasions, or it may not. The *mode* by which He did it does not signify, the *fact* that He did it is of the utmost significance.

It meant much to Abel, since thereby he "obtained witness that he was righteous," or, in other words, that he was right with God. It means much to us also, since in just the same way do we get evidence of our own justification. God did not testify to Abel or to the excellence of his character, but He did testify to the excellence of the sacrifice which he brought, and on the ground of which his approach was based. The moment that Abel knew that his sacrifice was accepted, he knew that he was accepted, since he stood or fell by the offering that he brought. His sacrifice being accepted, he knew that he was right with God.

Our assurance of being right with God, if it is to be solid and lasting, must be based upon the fact that our approach to God is on the ground of the sacrifice of Christ, and that His sacrifice, made once for all upon the cross, has been accepted by God.

How did God testify His acceptance of the atoning sacrifice of Christ? We can answer this question, thank God! without any element of uncertainty. We do not know exactly how God testified His acceptance of Abel's sacrifice, but we know without any doubt how He testified as to the sacrifice of Christ. Verses 12-14, of the previous chapter have told us that Christ "having offered one sacrifice for sins, sat down in perpetuity at the right hand of God . . . for by one offering He has perfected in perpetuity the sanctified" (Darby's New Trans.). His resurrection and session at the right hand of God is the Divine testimony to the supreme worth of His sacrifice.

God's testimony to His acceptance of the offering is evidence to the offerer that he is righteous. This is what Hebrews 11: 4 states in regard to Abel. The same thing exactly is true in regard to us. As the believer fixes the eye of faith on Jesus seated at the right hand of God, he has all the evidence he needs as to his complete justification before God. We cannot be too clear on this point. If we attempt to obtain evidence of being righteous in any other direction, focusing our attention upon our feelings, our experiences, or even our faith, we are bound to be landed into uncertainty. God bears no witness to any of these things, for none of them is perfect, and so any witness that may be borne as to them must be *human* at best. *God's witness* is borne to the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Perfect certainty is found in God's witness, and here we can safely rest.

Abel offered his more excellent sacrifice by faith. He brought the right kind of offering, but he did not do this by good fortune or a happy inspiration, but by *faith*. Now it was just this that Cain lacked. In desiring to draw near to God, he may have meant very well, but he had no understanding of God's way and his darkened mind led him to stumble along a way of his own. But, if Abel had faith, we may ask, in what did his faith rest? Faith simply takes God at His word, simply receives the light of the Divine revelation. Now where was the word or revelation that could be laid hold of by Abel's faith?

The only revelation which is disclosed to us in the Scriptures is that provided by God's action on the day sin entered Eden, when He clothed Adam and Eve in coats made from skins. These coats must have involved death falling upon the animals whose skins were taken for this purpose. So on the very day that sin entered the Garden, death entered too; only it was not the death of the man and woman who had sinned, but rather the death of innocent victims, whereby was provided the covering needed by the sinners. This action of the Lord God was deeply significant. It was one of those occasions when actions did indeed speak more loudly than words. God presented His mind in a pictorial way.

There was something very suitable in this since the human race was at that moment in its infancy. We all know that to human individuals in infancy a picture conveys much more than a multitude of words. God set forth His way of covering guilty sinners, so that they might be able to abide His

presence, in this pictorial way, and Abel had the faith to grasp and understand the Divine way. It is only by faith that we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God; and only by faith did Abel understand the right way of approach to God, or do we understand it today. Again and again we witness the sad spectacle of the wise and prudent of this world fumbling in complete darkness where the way to God is in question, and quite unconscious of the darkness they are in. They have first-class intellects and even prodigious learning, but no faith.

Though in point of order we have dwelt upon faith last, it comes first in Hebrews 11: 4, since there everything begins on our side. On God's side the sacrifice of supreme and eternal value stands first: first in His mind, and first historically, if we think of ourselves, antedating our very existence by many centuries. Still on our side faith rightly stands in the first place, and there we begin, and then the other items fall into their places.

The order of our verse is this: — *faith, sacrifice, witness, righteousness, speaking*. Does not this order suit us exactly? Our faith being centred in the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, we find in His resurrection and exaltation God's witness to its supreme sufficiency, and thus the peace! giving knowledge of righteousness takes possession of our hearts. Then, and not till then, can we open our lips in testimony, and speak that which we have discovered for ourselves.

Abel's blood spoke, and cried for vengeance. The blood of Christ speaks better things than that of Abel.