

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Dr. Gordon Hughes

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## The Gallery of Faith - Hebrews 11: Introduction and Abel

Recently my wife and I visited the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight, Merseyside. We had gone there to listen to a talk on one of the most famous paintings there - *The Scapegoat*, by Holman Hunt. It is based on the Jewish Day of Atonement which we can read about in Leviticus 16. Once a year, the sins of the people were confessed over the head of this goat, which was then taken away into the wilderness to perish. The picture really captures the desolation of that wilderness. The whole action is meant to be a picture of the awful desolation that Christ knew when He hung as our sin-bearer on the cross of Calvary. Holman Hunt's other famous painting is, of course, Christ the Light of the world, and hangs in St. Paul's, London. That shows a picture of the Lord Jesus patiently knocking on the outside of a door which obviously has not been opened for a very long time. It challenges us all as to whether we have ever opened our hearts to the Lord Jesus as our Saviour.

After viewing *The Scapegoat*, we wandered through the rest of the gallery. There were lots of portraits of men and women, some famous, others less well known.

Hebrews 11 has rightly been called God's Gallery of Faith. In it, we find God's portraits of men and women of faith in the Old Testament. It is striking that here God shows to us only the good that their faith moved them to do. He passes over their failures and weaknesses, which He had plainly portrayed in the Old Testament. That ability to see the good in others and not to focus on their faults and failings must have a message for us today!

As we pass through this gallery of faith, there are so many lessons for us to learn. Today we will have time only to look at the first portrait, that of Abel with the lesson of faith to approach God. In the next three talks, we will, God willing, be looking at Enoch: the faith to please God; Noah: the faith to serve God; Abraham: the faith to obey God; Sarah: the faith to receive strength from God; Isaac: the faith to be a blessing; Jacob: the faith to worship; and finally, Joseph: the faith to hope. We shall find many and varied lessons, but each of them important.

Why is God showing us these different men and women of faith? The climax of Hebrews 11 is found in 12:2: "Looking unto Jesus, the author (or originator) and finisher (or completer) of faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God". It's as if God would say to us, as we leave this gallery of faith, "You've looked at all these men and women of faith. But now I want you to look at My beloved Son. From first to last, His was the life of faith. Be like Him!"

So to Abel, and the important lesson he still teaches us as to how we approach God. But first, we need to look at what we mean by this all-important word 'faith'. Chapter 11 opens with this important declaration: "What is faith? It is the confident assurance that something we hope for is going to happen. It is the certainty that what we hope for is waiting for us, even though we cannot see it ahead". I have read from the Living Bible. Although that is a fairly free translation, I find it helpful. Faith is no wishy-washy hope that something might happen, but rather a deliberate conviction that this will be. A good word to help us understand faith is trust. In the biblical sense, faith is that total trust in God that leads me to stake my whole life on what He has said.

So the chapter continues, "By faith - by believing God - we know that the world and the stars - in fact, all things - were made at God's command; and that they were made from nothing" (verse 3). So important is faith in having to do with God that verse 6 tells us, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him".

It is by faith that we first come to Christ, believing that on the cross of Calvary He died for our sins. As a result of that, as Paul writes, "Therefore, having been justified (or, made right) by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Saving faith, however, is not something which we exercise just at the beginning of our Christian life. This trust in God is at the heart of our day by day relationship with God.

Buried away in the little known book of the prophet, Habakkuk, is this short but vital statement: "The just shall live by faith" (2:4). That is such an important statement that it is repeated in the New Testament no fewer than three times - see Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. The same is true of a related statement. In Genesis 15:6, we read, "And [Abraham] believed in the LORD, and He accounted to him for righteousness". That statement is also

repeated three times in the New Testament - see Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; and James 2:23. God would impress upon all of us this morning the importance of faith in Himself! Do you know what it is to have this saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? As we turn now to look at Abel, may we each of us learn the necessity and the blessing of faith in approaching God.

The story of the two brothers, Cain and Abel, is found in Genesis 4. We'll read it together: "Now Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, "I have gotten a man from the LORD". Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell" (verses 1-5). Sadly, in his anger, Cain killed his brother, Abel, so becoming the world's first murderer.

As we first read the story, we cannot help but feel rather sorry for Cain. After all, hadn't he brought the results of his hard work to the Lord, just as his brother, Abel, had done. I do not doubt for a moment that Cain brought the very best that he could. There would have been nothing second-rate or damaged about Cain's offering. Was God being unfair, then, in accepting Abel's offering but rejecting Cain's?

First of all, let us be absolutely clear that there is no unfairness with God. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by trouble and calamity, we may sometimes want to blame God and feel that He's not being fair. But the one dependable fact in life is that God is always fair and right in what He does. Abraham was totally convinced of this as He pleaded with God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, where his nephew, Lot, lived. Abraham challenged God, "Far be it from You...to slay the righteous with the wicked ... Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). David, although he had grievously sinned, acknowledged the rightness of God's judgment as he prayed, "That You may be found just when You speak, and blameless in Your ways" (Psalm 51:4). It is interesting that the apostle Paul quotes these very words in his letter to the Romans (3:4). In that same letter, Paul emphasises the absolute righteousness of God and the total lack of partiality in His dealings with men. Twice over, Paul makes the statement, "For there is no difference". Firstly, the statement is made as regards God's judgment: "For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:22-23). Secondly, the statement is made as regards the mercy of God: "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him" (10:12).

There has to be another reason, then, why God accepted Abel's offering but not that of Cain. In order to appreciate this, we need to go back to the previous chapter in Genesis. Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden and so sin entered the world. God's judgment fell upon Adam and Eve, who had to be expelled from Eden. God's judgment upon Adam is significant: "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life ... In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:17-19). But before expelling Adam and Eve from the garden, we read, "Also for Adam and his wife the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them" (verse 21). But where did God get those tunics of skin to cover over the nakedness of Adam and Eve. They would have come from an animal or animals, possibly sheep, which would have been killed to provide a covering for Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve learned a very important lesson that day - to provide them with a covering so that they might stand before God, another had died. It was not until many centuries later that the writer to the Hebrews would pen the words, "And according to the law almost all things are purged with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission" (9:22). But there in the Garden of Eden, in those early days of man's history, Adam and Eve had an object lesson on that all-important principle of God's dealings with sinful man: "Without shedding of blood there is no remission".

We do not know if God expressly told Adam and Eve to pass this lesson on to their sons, but no doubt, as godly parents, they would have done so. It was that lesson which Cain chose to ignore. He might bring the very best of his produce to God but it was the produce of a cursed earth. In no way could Cain stand before God with such a sacrifice. So many today still struggle with that lesson. They reason that, provided they do their best, that will be good enough for God, completely ignoring what God has said about the way in which sinful man needs to approach Him.

But Abel learned that lesson. That is where his faith came in. He took God at His word. That is what faith does. It might have been his favourite lamb, but no matter. Blood had to be shed, and Abel would come to God in God's way: "Without shedding of blood there is no remission".

Today, it is just as vital as ever that we approach God in God's appointed way. Some people have difficulty with the idea of a blood sacrifice being necessary to approach God. They feel that that idea belongs to a bygone age - that

now we can each of us approach God in whatever way we feel most comfortable with, generally based on some idea of our own good works. Cain had to learn to his cost that that way will not work! Today God has provided a way in which we, sinners as we are, are able to come into His very presence. The Lord Jesus Himself insisted that He is uniquely that way, when He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

Through His death on Calvary's cross, the Lord Jesus has made that way back to God for each one of us. After Jesus had died, a Roman soldier pierced His side with a spear, and as the apostle John records, "immediately blood and water came out" (19:34). His life laid down in death, as betokened by His shed blood, is the only basis on which a righteous and holy God can receive sinful man. On the day Jesus died, a most dramatic event testified to the good news that the way into God's presence had been finally opened up. In the Temple in Jerusalem, not too far from the cross of Calvary, the veil of the Temple, which up till now had shut men out from the presence of God, was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). No human hand tore that curtain that day, else it would have been torn from bottom to top. God Himself, in this dramatic gesture, was saying to the world that there was now a way back to Himself!

Two hundred and fifty years ago this August, sixteen year old Augustus Toplady, in a barn in Southern Ireland, listened to a preacher who could hardly spell his own name, read from the Bible the words of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:13: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ". That day, Augustus Toplady put his trust in Christ as his Saviour for the first time. Some years later, while out in the open air, Augustus Toplady was caught in a violent storm, but managed to find shelter in the cleft of a rock near Cheddar Gorge. As a result of that experience, he wrote his famous hymn,

*Rock of ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee.  
Let the water and the blood  
From Thy riven side which flowed  
Be of sin the double cure,  
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.*

The hymn goes on to plead,

*Nothing in my hand I bring;  
Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress,  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly:  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.*

Yes, the good news of the Gospel is that the way into God's presence has now been opened up so that all may come in faith, just as Augustus Toplady came. The writer to the Hebrews still invites us today, "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water" (10:19-22).

This morning, may we each learn this simple, but vital, lesson which Abel teaches us. He came to God in God's appointed way, in faith taking God at His word and bringing His Lamb as a blood sacrifice.

It was as a result of such a sacrifice that, as we have seen, Adam and Eve were clothed to stand before God. As you and I come to God, trusting in Christ alone as our Saviour, we find that God no longer looks at us in all our sin and need, but rather as those who are now clothed in the robes of the righteousness of His beloved Son! So Paul writes to the Ephesians, "[God] has made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (1:6-7). As we learn the truth of these sublime words, we can exclaim, with Count von Zinzendorf,

*Jesus, the Lord, our righteousness!  
Our beauty Thou, our glorious dress!  
Midst flaming worlds in this arrayed,  
With joy we shall lift up the head.*

*Bold shall we stand in that great day,  
For who ought to our charge shall lay,  
While by Thy blood absolved we are  
From sin and guilt, from shame and fear?*

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