

Beyond the Cherubim

Heroes, Part 3

Hebrews 11:4

I find it fascinating that the very first human being brought to our attention in Hebrews chapter 11 is a man who suffered because of his demonstration of living faith.

His name is Abel . . . and he not only suffered, he paid the ultimate price – he died because of it.

Open the 11th Chapter of Hebrews and you're almost immediately confronted with the fact that God will break every rule in a marketing campaign.

You want people to sign up for Christianity? Promise them that a life of faith guarantees a long, healthy, happy and prosperous journey.

Like the newest bestseller by Joel Osteen who delivers 31 promises to speak over your life that will ensure the universe responds with good things. Wrapped in pseudo Christian language, this false shepherd will tell millions of readers to make 31 declarations. Here's the first declaration – I didn't read the other 30. "I declare God's incredible blessings over my life. I will see an explosion of God's goodness, a sudden widespread increase. I will experience the surpassing greatness of God's favor. It will elevate me to a level higher than I ever dreamed of. (Yea, it elevated Abel, right to heaven.) Osteen says – just declare this – final words to speak, "Explosive blessings are coming my way."¹

I wonder how these heroes of faith would define explosive.

You see, you open up God's brochure for testimonials of living faith and the first man of faith you encounter gets killed for it.

How many books do you think Abel could sell?

How many decision cards do you think will get filled out after Abel delivers his personal testimony?

You see, ladies and gentlemen, as we explore the life of Abel in our study, let me remind you that Hebrews chapter 11 isn't looking for decisions – it's looking for disciples.

Decisions are easy to make – disciples are hard to make.

Decisions take a moment – discipleship takes a lifetime.

One of the reasons I like going to Cracker Barrel – which is a significant part of the discipleship process – I'll make that declaration – is because I can order pancakes and, unlike the average restaurant that brings me thick sticky, artificially colored, artificially sweetened, Hungry Jack type of syrups – I don't get that at Cracker Barrel. They use pure maple syrup.

Now if you want to have that kind of syrup at home, you gotta pay a lot more money than you would for that artificial stuff. And that's because of the time it takes to make pure maple syrup. It doesn't just happen.

The traditional method of making syrup requires workers to venture deep into the woods they call the "sugar bush". They use hand drills to make small holes in the trunks of maple trees.

A metal tube called a spile is carefully tapped into each hole, and a bucket is hung on each spile. The sap drips – one drip at a time – into those buckets.

I have read that on a good day, 50 trees might yield 40 gallons of sap – a thin, clear watery like substance with only a hint of sweetness.

But then the buckets are poured into large kettles that sit over open fires. The sap comes to a slow

boil and as it boils, the water content is reduced and sugars are concentrated.

Hours later, it has developed into a rich flavor and golden-brown color. Then it's strained several times to remove impurities and then it's reheated all over again.

40 gallons of maple sap will be needed to produce only 1 gallon of pure maple syrup – that's why it's so expensive.ⁱⁱ

And that's the kind of syrup delivered to my table at Cracker Barrel in a tiny, glass bottle containing that liquid gold.

How many would like pancakes right about now? With extra butter – I'll admit it.

That syrup happens to be an illustration of genuine faith . . . strained and pressured over time for impurities; heated in the fire and then reheated all over again. In fact, some never quite escape the fire.

Hebrews 11 will show us faith that is artificial and faith that is pure; one which is quickly made and only looks the part; the other which is costly and is the genuine item.

Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 4 contrasts that faith for us as it opens, By faith, Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

This text immediately takes us to the beginning years of human history. And it informs us that some rather dramatic things took place.

If you turn back to the fuller account of Abel's testimony in the Book of Genesis – and I'd like you to turn there – you'll discover that while the Bible records many events that took place, it doesn't record all of them.

But what you do discover are some very interesting clues along with life changing truths.

For instance, look at ***chapter 3 and verse 20***. This is just after Adam and Eve are exposed and confronted by God in the garden for having eaten the forbidden fruit.

God delivers several curses on His once innocent creation. He curses the serpent – literally Satan – and says to him in ***verse 15***. ***And I will put enmity between you and the woman. And between your seed and her seed. And He*** – that is the seed of the woman – ***will bruise (literally, crush) you on the head and you will bruise him on the heel.***

In other words, Satan will be able to bring damage and destruction to the followers of this coming Redeemer – including the Redeemer Himself, but it'll only be temporary bruises; but He – the Redeemer – will mortally crush the head of Satan in defeat.

Then, in this chapter, God delivers His punishment upon Adam and Eve, informing them that they will now be barred from the Garden – Paradise – which represented intimate worship and fellowship with God.

But just before He sends them out of the Garden, notice ***verse 21; The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.***

This is the first act of atonement – this is the first death which effectively covered the guilt of sin. It was the first picture of the coming Redeemer who would become the final sacrifice for sin.

Adam and Eve had attempted to cover over their guilt with fig leaves. That's the first attempt at false religion. Man-made effort to hide a guilty conscience.

The problem is, God can see through fig leaves. And the sin remains.

Instead, God provides for them clothing from the bloodshed of an innocent animal and He effectively teaches Adam and Eve that through the blood of an innocent animal, their sin would be covered temporarily while they waited for the coming One who would permanently atone for the guilt of their sin.

So how did Adam and Eve respond?

Though shamed and cursed and fallen and dejected and crushed and sorrowful, they trusted the atoning provision of God and choose to trust Him even as they are expelled from the garden.

And we know that because of the very next chapter. Notice ***chapter 4 and verse 1***. ***Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, "I have gotten a man child with the help of the Lord."***

In other words, instead of Eve rebelling in anger and rejecting the atoning plan of God, she maintains trust in God and here in the delivery room, she's praising God for the birth of Cain.

And more than that, she names her son, Cain – which means, "to get . . . to get something, or even, he's here." Many scholars believe she's actually referring to the earlier promise of a man-child coming to redeem them.ⁱⁱⁱ

And she thinks, “He’s it!” So she celebrates, “Praise God, I’ve gotten him.”

Unfortunately, Cain won’t be mankind’s Redeemer, he will become mankind’s first murderer.

He won’t give life – he will take life.

Sometime after the birth of Cain, Eve bears their second son, Abel.

Verse 2 tells us that the boys grew up and one of them decided to get his major in animal husbandry and the other son decided to major in agriculture.

Keep in mind, they are growing up outside the Garden, fully aware of their parent’s history, fully aware of God’s system of sacrifice and atonement and fully aware of the promised Redeemer.

We know that because of **verse 3**. **Notice, So it came about in the course of time – literally, at the end of days – they brought their offerings.** This phrase, many Old Testament scholars believe, is an expression for some kind of annual event. The **end of days** can be translated, “revolution of days” – or literally, the end of the year.^{iv}

This was standard procedure. Cain and Abel didn’t come up with this idea on their own; it had been handed down to them from Adam and Eve – again, we’re not given the detailed curriculum for their religious education at home, but the actions of these two sons are consistent with an awareness of what God required in this post-garden existence regarding sacrifice.

It wasn’t man’s idea to come up with an altar. Atonement wasn’t man’s creation. It wasn’t man’s idea to heap some stones on top of each other and kill some innocent animal and burn it on the altar.

God had obviously given to mankind the way to approach Him – and it was through the blood.

So here’s early human history, in a nutshell . . . think of it this way:

- In Genesis chapter 1 you have creation of man by God;
- In Genesis chapter 2 you have communion between man and God;
- In Genesis chapter 3 you have corruption away from God;
- And in Genesis chapter 4 you have confession toward God.

And that confession was a statement of faith in God’s mercy by way of blood sacrifice – the innocent dying for the guilty.

Now notice **verse 3** again; **Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. 4. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of**

his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; 5. But for Cain and for his offering He had no regard.

Now most people unfortunately believe that Cain just got the short end of the straw. I mean, how unlucky can you get. He goes into farming and his brother goes into livestock and wouldn’t you know it – God prefers livestock over fruit and vegetables.

Cain must have been thinking, what a bummer . . . I chose the wrong career.

But that’s wasn’t Cain’s problem.

Based on the collation of events found in the first 5 chapters Genesis regarding the age of Adam and the ages of his sons, Cain, Abel and Seth – Old Testament scholars place Cain at more than 120 years of age when this event occurs here in Genesis 4.^v

Did you get that? Cain was at least 120 years of age and Abel not too far behind.

Keep in mind that before the flood, these early forefathers lived hundreds of years – in fact, Adam died when he was 930 years old.

That’s a lot of candles.

So Cain and Abel are relatively young men in their early 100’s.

The point is – and this is significant – Cain and Able had offered individual sacrifices to God perhaps 100 times or more before. While we can’t be sure how many times Cain and Abel appeared at the altar with their sacrifices, we can be sure that this event in Genesis 4 was not their *first* appearance.

And we have every reason to believe that this appearance, recorded here, was that moment when Cain effectively said, “I’m tired of getting animals from my brother’s ranch . . . I’m just as significant to God . . . I’m working just as hard as anybody . . . what’s the big deal . . . this year I’m going to do it *my* way.”

“I’m going to bring all my blue ribbon vegetables and fruit and offer them on the altar to God.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, the serpent hasn’t gone on vacation. He’s been working for more than a hundred years with the same strategy.

And Cain eventually falls for the same line used a century earlier when the serpent whispered into the ear of his mother – Did God really say that? I mean, does God really mean what He says?

- Maybe you can eat the fruit and God won’t care?
- Maybe you can offer the fruit of the ground as a sacrifice and God won’t care!

Come on, aren't you taking God's word a little too seriously? Why would he bother . . . you believe in Him don't you? You've got a perfect attendance record . . . just this once, do it your own way.

So after approaching God the right way perhaps 100 times before, this time, Cain says, "I'll approach God with the work of my own hands . . . never mind it is fruit from the ground which has been cursed . . . I'm sure God won't mind!"

Beloved, do you know what you have here? You have the beginning of the history of world religions!

It all looks good. It all kinda looks the same. It all looks like Maple syrup. You can hardly tell the difference . . .

Think about it . . . here in Genesis chapter 4, reiterated in Hebrews 11:4;

- Both Cain and Abel are coming to the prescribed place of sacrifice
- They both seem to want to worship God
- They both come at the prescribed time
- They both come to use their altar
- They both bring an offering
- They both demonstrate faith that an invisible God will accept their offering.^{vi}

But one of them is genuine and the other one is artificial.

Take a closer look . . .

- Abel is obedient to God's plan of forgiveness; Cain is disobedient to God's plan;^{vii}
- Abel is bringing what God wanted Cain is bringing what he wanted.
- Abel is following divine revelation Cain is following human reasoning
- Abel is coming to God by means of a future cross Cain is attempting to come to God by ignoring the cross.^{viii}

Jude 11 refers to religious systems categorically as simply, "***the way of Cain.***" Cain becomes the example throughout human history, not of genuine faith, but a religious system which says we believe in a higher deity; we're committed to religious works and practices to approach Him; but we're going to deny the specific, satisfactory, atoning work of the Messiah who died on a cross.

This is the way of Cain; just let me come to God my way and we'll just avoid all this talk about sin and guilt and sacrifice and the need for a Savior."

"Let me bring to God what I've produced."

Listen, Cain was simply offering his version of fig leaves to God.

The problem is, you can't get back to God your way. In fact, the way to God is barred . . . in fact, from the Garden of Eden after the fall of man all the way through the Old Testament and up to the cross of Christ, God clearly illustrated that the way back to Him was under lock and key. You gotta have the right key.

Let me show you what I mean.

What you see here in ***Genesis 4*** is Cain and Abel coming with their offering. There's no mention of needing to build an altar – and that's because the altar already existed. They'd been using it for 100 years.

Cain and Abel not only had a prescribed time for worship and confession (annually); they not only had a prescribed manner in which to approach God (through animal sacrifice); but they also had a place to worship Him.

We're told that when Adam and Eve left the garden, God assigned a pair of cherubim – warrior angels – to guard the Garden and we're told specifically in ***Genesis 3:24*** that they guarded the entrance to the Garden on the east side preventing mankind from re-entering.

Many believe that it would be at this place – right there in the presence of those cherubim and their flaming sword – it would be at that place where Adam and Eve – and later their sons – the place that marked their exile; the place where the curse was delivered along with the promise of a Redeemer; that was the place they came to offer their God-prescribed atoning sacrifices.

I find it anything but coincidental that the priests would later approach worshipping God in both the Tabernacle and later in the Temple from the east side.

We're not told how long these cherubim guarded the Garden of Eden. They may very well have stayed until the flood of Noah wiped mankind off the face of the earth in Genesis chapter 7 and reshaped the topography of earth in that catastrophic event which caused the Garden to disappear.

But get this – even after the flood, the memory of the fall of man and exile of mankind from Paradise and the cherubim which barred the entrance of man before the presence of God would be kept alive by God. He didn't want them to forget.

So as Israel departs from Egypt during the time of Moses, God gave directions for the construction

of a Tabernacle. This was a moveable meeting place and at its center was the holy of holies, wherein rested the ark of the covenant – a golden box containing the tablets of the law delivered to Moses. It was the place of God’s unique presence.

Priests could come into the room just outside the Holy of Holies – a room called the Holy Place – where they performed a number of sacred duties unto God.

But a heavy curtain separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. And God prescribed in Exodus 26 that Israelite seamstresses were to embroider into the fabric of that curtain the figures of cherubim.

The cherubim were still guarding the way. At best the people could do was sacrifice to Him at a distance.

Later the temple was built and once again, huge cherubim were sewn into the curtain to signify that, once again, access was restricted.

In the temple they had a pair of huge sculpted cherubim standing guard in the inner sanctuary (***1 Kings 6***). 15 feet high with their wings spread out another 15 feet.

Huge, imposing, impressive . . . the message from the Garden of Eden was still alive and well. You can’t come in here. But you can sacrifice nearby.

In fact, only one man could enter the Holy of Holies and that High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies in trembling fear – and when did he enter? At the end of days – once a year.

And he would come bearing the blood of an innocent animal. He would slip between the folds of that curtain embroidered with those warrior angels and once inside the Holy of Holies he would face the ark of the covenant in front of him.

And he would immediately be awe struck by the golden sculptor of two cherubim rising on either side of that golden box as if they were hovering above it – their wings crafted so that they reached forward and touched each other. (Exodus 25)

They were still guarding the presence of God as it were and for the most part, mankind was still barred from free and open access.

But the priest would sprinkle the blood on the lid of that box – called the mercy seat and God would *temporarily* be satisfied with the covering of the sins of the nation.

Temporarily? Yes . . . but it all pointed to a wooden altar upon which the Lamb of God would

come to die and put an end to all sacrifices for all time.

And just before He died our Redeemer cried out, “It is finished.”

And what happened then?

That curtain in the Temple nearby was ripped from top to bottom – as if to say from God the Father Himself, the cherubim no longer bar the way to personal communion and personal confession and one-to-one fellowship between the worshipper and the Living God.

You can now get past the cherubim – in fact, you can do better than the High Priest – you can go between and beyond the cherubim to the very throne of God.

And even now, every believer can walk again with God, in the cool of the day.

Horatius Bonar wrote a poem that says it well;

*Not what my hands have done
Can save my guilty soul;
Not what my toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole*

*Thy work alone, O Christ,
Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God
Can give me peace within.*

*No other work, save Thine,
No other blood will do;
No strength, save that which is divine,
Can bear me safely through.^{ix}*

Now let me show you something else from the testimony of Abel; Moses writes in ***Genesis 4 and verse 6 that God had regard for Abel’s offering but not for the offering of Cain.***

The writer of ***Hebrews 11 said it this way, “God testified about his gifts.”***

You could translate that, ***“God testified over his gifts.”***

In other words, God did something obvious to everyone that showed he received Abel’s offering and not Cain’s offering.

What exactly did God do to testify publically?

We’re not told specifically, but by comparing scripture we can, I believe determine that something dramatic happened at each sacrifice.

It was something God did throughout the Old Testament to prove the authenticity of both the offering and the offerer.

- When God accepted Aaron's sacrifice in **Leviticus 9**, he sent fire from heaven and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering.
- Gideon watched as fire came from the angel of the Lord upon his sacrifice in **Judges 6**.
- When Elijah and false priests of Baal put their faith on trial, God testified to the authenticity of Elijah's faith in the true and living God by sending fire from heaven to consume the offering (**1 Kings 18**)
- When King David offered solemn sacrifice to God, we read in **1 Chronicles 21:26** that God answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar.
- When Solomon offered to God the sacrifices of praise at the dedication of the Temple, in **2 Chronicles 7**, the Bible says that fire came down from heaven and consumed every sacrifice.

Fire from heaven was God's testimony of acceptance.

It may very well be that year after year as Adam and Eve came to the edge of the garden, along with their sons, and gave their offerings on that altar, within sight of the cherubim who guarded everything they'd lost, that the Lord in His grace testified to their faith by sending fire from heaven, consuming their offerings.

Only this year was different. Cain had brought an animal a hundred times before. But this time, he evidently said to himself, "God will testify to the work of my hands," while Abel brought innocent life which he could not create with his hands – that's why his offering was better.

And there they stood . . . and the fire fell. Abel's gift was consumed and Cain's produce remained untouched.

It was utter humiliation . . . it was public embarrassment . . . and the serpent whispered . . . it is blatant favoritism . . . you're just as good as he is.

And the envy in the heart of Cain began to burn to the point that before that year was out, Cain became the first murderer and his little brother became the first to suffer a violent crime – the first martyr – the first believer to die – because he declared true faith.

But that wasn't the last word. **Hebrews 11 and verse 4 gives us the added insight that even though**

Abel was dead, he's still speaking to us to this very day.

What's he saying?

- When you live in obedience to the word of God your life might not get easier, it might get more difficult.
- The walk of faith may lead you directly into the valley of the shadow of death.

Think of it:

- Abel did what was right and was hated for it
- He worshipped God correctly and was persecuted for it
- He obeyed God and was murdered because of it

He being dead still speaks . . . what else might he be saying?

- There's only one way to God.
- There's only one foundation for believing, genuine faith.
- Without the shedding of blood there is no remission for sin.

And the curtain stays closed and the gate remains locked.

In our fuller understanding of God's redemptive plan – which Abel knew only a fraction of – Abel's faith was saying this – Jesus paid it all.

Everything else is fig leaves . . . religion . . . the way of Cain. It might be brown and sticky and sweet and have a label on it, and look the part, but it's artificial.

Jesus Christ and faith in Him alone is the genuine sweetness of pure faith.

Here Abel stands at an altar, can you see him, with those two cherubim with flashing swords of fire standing nearby; barring the gate to Paradise lost.

Abel acknowledges God's right to exile him too; he's acknowledging he's a sinner too; he's admitting his own need for covering and atonement; he offers his sacrifice and the fire falls, testifying not only of God's pleasure, but testifying the core of the gospel.

That there is the coming seed of the woman – the coming Redeemer who will feel the fire of God the Father's wrath upon Him; and because of His sacrifice, access to Paradise – a new heaven and a new earth – access to the throne of God . . . the doors are reopened.

There are no cherubim standing in the way.

And Abel – the first human hero of faith, begins the legacy; what he practiced outside the Garden what Christ would submit to inside a Garden where

He prayed, “Not my will but Thine.” And then hours later, just outside that Garden of fellowship, He submitted to an altar of wood . . . and separation . . . and He finished it . . . once and for all.

- Abel’s sacrifice was one lamb for one person;
- Later came the Passover: one lamb for one family;
- Later came the annual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement: one lamb for one nation;
- Then came the Messiah – the seed of the woman – and it was one Lamb for the entire world.^x

Now that’s something worth declaring!
What is Mr. Abel, this hero of faith, saying today? He would gladly sing with us the lyrics . . .

*My faith has found a resting place
Not in device nor creed
I trust the ever living One
His wounds for me shall plead;
I need no other argument,
**I need no other plea,
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that He died for me.***

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/23/2012 by Stephen Davey.
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i Joel Olsteen, I Declare (Faith Words; Hachette Book Group, 2012), p. 1

ii Adapted from preachingtoday.com/the-art-of-maple-sugaring (Christianity Today, 2012)

iii John MacArthur, Hebrews (Moody, 1983), p. 296

iv Thomas Manton, By Faith: Sermons on Hebrews 11 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), p. 115

v Hughes, p. 252

vi Manton, p. 122

vii MacArthur, p. 299

viii Kenneth S. Wuest, Hebrews in the Greek New Testament (Eerdmans, 1969), p. 197

ix Phillips, p. 411

x MacArthur, p. 300