

# The Book of Hebrews Year 2 Bible Study Lesson 6

## Hebrews 11:4 Notes

### Contrast of Two Worshippers

#### Introduction:

(J. MacArthur) James Moffatt wrote, "Death is never the last word in the life of a righteous man. When a man leaves this world, be he righteous or unrighteous, he leaves something in the world. He may leave something that will grow and spread like a cancer or a poison, or he may leave something like the fragrance of perfume or a blossom of beauty that permeates the atmosphere with blessing." Man leaves this world either a Paul or a Nero.

Dead men do tell tales. They are not silent, but still speak to those who will listen. From many thousands of years ago, Abel speaks to twentieth-century man. This man who lived when the earth was new, who was of the second generation of mankind, has something to teach modern, sophisticated, technological man. He lived in a far distant age, in a far different culture, with far less light from God than we have. But what he has to tell us is more relevant than anything we are likely to read in our current newspapers or magazines.

The obvious theme of Hebrews 11 is FAITH, and it is about faith that Abel speaks to us. He is the first in a long line of faithful persons who can teach us about the life of faith. He, and the others mentioned in chapter 11, illustrate a pure kind of faith that sharply isolates it from works. It is this distinction that the Jewish readers especially needed to see. They had to be shown, from the very beginning, faith has been the only thing that God will accept to save fallen man.

Adam and Eve could not have been persons of faith in the same way as their descendants. They had seen God face-to-face, fellowshiped with Him, talked with Him, and had lived in the garden of paradise. Until they sinned, they had no need for faith, because they lived in God's very light. Even after they sinned, they had the memory and knowledge of this unique and beautiful relationship with their Creator. Their children were the first to have need of faith in its fullest sense. Abel was the first man of faith, and it is important to understand that his faith had to do with his personal salvation. Abel's faith led to three progressive things: true sacrifice, true righteousness, and true witness. Because he believed, he offered a better sacrifice. Because he offered a better sacrifice, he obtained righteousness. Because he obtained righteousness, he is for all the ages a living voice saying, "Righteousness is by faith."

God put Adam and Eve out of the garden because of sin. Sin violated their fellowship with God and forfeited their right to be in His presence. But even as His judgment sent them out, His grace promised a way back. Through woman a man would be born whose heel would be bruised by Satan but who would bruise

Satan on the head (Gen. 3:15). That is, this One who would be born from the seed of woman would conquer and destroy Satan, and thereby deliver mankind from sin's curse. Within the very curse itself, a Redeemer was promised. While judgment was being executed, mercy was being offered.

Only one woman, the mother of Jesus, has ever possessed a seed apart from its being implanted by a man. The Holy Spirit placed the seed in her, and in this way it was the seed of woman that gave birth to Jesus, the promised Savior. Not only the coming of the Redeemer but also His virgin birth was prophesied in the first part of the first book of God's Word.

Adel was "a keeper of flocks," while Cain was "a tiller of the ground." One was a shepherd, the other a farmer. Both were conceived after the fall and were born outside of Eden. They were therefore both born in sin. They were the second and third men ever to live on earth. They had the same natures and capacities and limitations and inclinations that every person since then has had. In other words, in all the essentials of human nature, they were exactly as we are. In no way do they resemble the primitive beings of evolutionist fantasy.

Showing their preconceptions and biases, evolutionists and various interpreters of Scripture have argued that the Genesis account of man's beginnings cannot possibly be correct, because Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, and the others mentioned in the earlier chapters are far too advanced to have been the first human beings. Besides the impossible supernatural claims of Adam and Eve talking with God, critics reason that original man could not have domesticated animals, as Abel did, or plowed and planted field, as Cain did---much less have invented musical instruments or metal tools (Gen. 4:21-22).

The Bible is clear, however, that Adam and Eve were highly intelligent when God created them. Adam named all the animals, which required devising a creative vocabulary. Their sons understood animal husbandry and farming, and within a very few generations came the tools and musical instruments already mentioned. The Genesis account, brief as it is, gives the definite picture of people who were well-developed in language and in general culture.

The first human inhabitants of earth, Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, lived and functioned as human beings in the ways that we do today.

### **Abel Made a True Sacrifice:**

Hebrews 11:4 takes us back to Genesis, where we read of Abel's sacrifice: "So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. And 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; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard" (Gen. 4:3-5).

**A Place to Worship:** Cain and Abel had a place to worship. Because they brought offerings, some sort of altar must have been used on which to make the sacrifices.

There is no mention of their erecting an altar at this time, and it may be that an altar already existed near the east side of the garden of Eden, where God had place the cherubim with the flaming sword to prevent man from re-entering.

It seems perfectly consistent with God's grace that, from the beginning, He would have provided for some means of worship. Perhaps the altar here was a forerunner of the mercy seat, a place where man could come for forgiveness and atonement. Very early in man's history God promised a future Deliverer, and very early He provided a temporary means of worship and sacrifice.

**A Time For Worship:** There seems also to have been a time for worship. "In the course of time," means literally, "at the end of days," that is, at the end of a certain period of time. It may be, therefore, that God had designated a special time for sacrificing. God is a God of order, and we know that in later centuries He did prescribe definite times and ways of worshiping. The fact that Cain and Abel came to sacrifice at the same time also suggests that God had specified a particular time.

**A Way to Worship:** I also believe that God had designated a way to worship. Cain and Abel would know nothing about the need for worship or sacrifice, much less the way, had they not been told by God---perhaps through their parents. It is especially significant that the first recorded act of worship was sacrifice, a sin offering, the supreme act of worship in all of God's covenants with His people. Abraham sacrificed to God, and through Moses came the complicated and demanding rituals of sacrifice of the Old Covenant. The heart of the New Covenant is Jesus' perfect, once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. It is inconceivable that Cain and Abel accidentally stumbled onto sacrifice as a way of worshiping God. The fact that God accepted only the one sacrificial offering also seems to indicate that He had established a pattern for worship.

Abel offered his sacrifice by faith. Since "faith comes from hearing" (Rom. 10:17), Abel must have had some revelation from God on which his faith was based. He must have known the place and time and way in which God wanted the sacrifice for sin to be offered.

There was nothing intrinsically wrong with a grain or fruit or vegetable offering. The Mosaic covenant included such offerings. But the blood offerings were always first, because only the blood offerings dealt with sin.

**Here is where the life of faith begins, with a sacrifice for sin. It begins with believing God that we are sinners, that we are worthy of death, that we need His forgiveness, and that we accept His revealed plan for our deliverance. That is the beginning of the life of faith.** It was in such faith that Abel presented his sacrifice to God. And it was because of such faith that his sacrifice was acceptable to God.

When Abel did what God said, he revealed his obedience and acknowledged his sinfulness. Cain, on the other hand, was disobedient and did

not acknowledge his sin (or need of God's forgiveness-Carol). Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain because God had prescribed a blood sacrifice. Somehow Abel, and Cain as well, knew what God wanted. The difference between the two was that Able gave what God wanted, whereas Cain gave what he himself wanted. Abel was obedient and Cain was disobedient. Abel acknowledged his sin. Cain did not.

Abel approached God and said, in effect, "Lord, this is what You said You wanted. You promised that if I brought it, You would forgive my sin. I believe You, God. I acknowledge my sin and I acknowledge Your prescribed remedy. Here it is." Cain had the same knowledge of God's requirements, but decided to worship in his own way. In the tradition of his parents, he did his own thing. In effect, he was denying his sin.

Cain believed in God, else he would not have brought Him a sacrifice. He acknowledged a supreme being and even that he owed Him some sort of worship. He recognized God, but he did not obey God. He believed *in* God, but he did not *believe* God. He thought he could approach God in whatever way he wanted, and expected Him to be impressed and satisfied. In so doing, Cain became the father of all false religion.

False religion is trying to come to God by any other way than the way God has prescribed. It says, "I can get to God by thinking myself into Nirvana," or, "I can please God by meditation," or, "I can satisfy God by my works or by following the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy (founder of The Church of Christ, Scientist), Joseph Smith (founder of The Church of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons), or Charles Taze Russell (founder of Jehovah's Witnesses)." God's Word says, "There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). False religion says that there *is* another name, another way. False religion is any way to God that God Himself has not ordained. Proverbs 14:12 marks this truth: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

The idea that one way is just as good as another does not seem to be accepted in any area of life except religion and morality. When a person goes to a doctor with a problem, he first of all wants to know the truth. No one likes to hear a diagnosis of a terrible disease. But the sensible person would rather know the truth than live in ignorance of something that could ruin his health or even take his life. Once knowing the diagnosis, he then wants the right cure, not just any cure. He wants the best treatment he can find and will usually go to any lengths to get it. He would be insulted and infuriated with a doctor who told him simply to go home and do whatever he thought best---that one person's opinion was just as good as another's. The reason we think this way about medicine is that we believe there are medical *truths*. Medical science does not have all the answers, but a great deal is known and accepted as factual, reliable, and

dependable. The reason this same kind of reasoning is not applied to spiritual and moral issues is that the *absolute truths* and standards God has given are rejected. In fact, the very notion of spiritual and moral absolutes is rejected. Cain rejected God's standards and became the first apostate.

Cain failed to acknowledge his sin and refused to obey God by bringing the sacrifice God required. He did not mind worshiping God, as long as it was on his own terms, in his own way. And God rejected his sacrifice and rejected him.

Cain's disobedience of God and setting up his own standards of living were the beginning of Satan's world system. Cain "went out from the presence of the Lord" (Gen. 4:16) and into a life of continuous self-will, which is the heart of worldliness and unbelief. By his own decision, his own volition, he turned away from God and God's way to himself and his own way. We should not be sorry for him because God refused to honor his sacrifice. He knew what God required, and he was able to do it. But he chose instead to do what he himself wanted.

There are all kinds of people around under the guise of religion, even Christian religion, who are denying God. "Woe to them!" Jude says "For they have gone the way of Cain: (Jude 1:11). Cain is an example of the religious natural man, who believes in God and even in religion but after his own will and who rejects redemption by blood. Paul says of such people that "they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:2-3).

### **Like the Pharisee:**

In addition to being wicked and unbelieving, Cain was a hypocrite. He did not want to worship God but only give the appearance of worship. His purpose was to please himself, not God. His sacrifice was simply a religious activity designed to suit his own purposes and fulfill his own will. Cain was like the Pharisee in the Temple who Jesus said was praying "to himself", patronizing God and worshiping himself (Luke 18:11). Also like the Pharisee, Cain went home unjustified; whereas Abel, like the penitent tax gatherer, went home justified.

God is not arbitrary or whimsical or capricious. He was not playing a game with Cain and Abel. He did not hold them accountable for what they could not have known or could not have done. Abel's sacrifice was accepted because he knew what God wanted and obeyed. Cain's was rejected because he knew what God wanted, yet disobeyed. To obey is righteous; to disobey is evil. Abel was of God; Cain was of Satan (1 John 3:12).

### **Abel Obtained Righteousness:**

Abel offered a better sacrifice because it represented the obedience of faith. He willingly brought God what He asked, and he brought the very best that

he had. In Abel's sacrifice, the way of the cross was first prefigured. The first sacrifice was Abel's lamb---one lamb for one person. Later came the Passover---with one lamb for one family. Then came the Day of Atonement---with one lamb for one nation. Finally came Good Friday---one Lamb for the whole world.

The only thing that obtained righteousness for Abel was that, in faith, he did what God told him to do. That is the only thing that changes a man's relationship to God. It is not how good we are, but whether or not we trust in Him, that counts with God. That trust is evidenced in obedience to His Word.

Abel was sinful, just as Cain was. But it is quite possible, even likely, that Abel was a better person than Cain. He was probably more moral, more dependable, more honest, and even more likable than Cain. It was not, however, these qualities of Abel that made his sacrifice acceptable, or the lack of these qualities that made Cain's sacrifice unacceptable. The difference was the way in which the sacrifices were made. One was made in obedient faith; the other made in disobedient unbelief.

Abel's was the kind of faith that allows God to move in on our behalf and make us righteous. True faith is always obedient. Jesus said "to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine'" (John 8:31). These people believed Jesus, but they had not yet trusted in Him, which Jesus said would be marked by obedience to His word. Obedience does not bring faith, but faith will always bring obedience and the desire to live righteously.

### **Faith and Works:**

We cannot claim to have faith in God and then continually disregard His Word. James must have known some people who thought this way, for he wrote, "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? . . . Faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (James 2:14, 17). Nonworking faith, disobedient faith, is not saving faith. It is not valid faith at all. Cain believed that God exists. Even the demons believe this, James goes on to say. "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?" (James 2:19-20).

James then drives the point home by reminding his readers that Abraham's faith, for which he was counted righteous, was demonstrated by his obedience in offering his son Isaac as God commanded. "You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected" (James 2:21-22).

James does not teach salvation by works. He is saying that our faith is only real when it issues in works. We cannot work our way to God, but having come to Him, works will become evident---and prove that our faith is genuine. The Christian, in fact, is "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Abel was counted righteous, not because he was righteous, but because he trusted God. He stood righteous before God because he had faith in God. Abel was the same sinner as he was before he made the sacrifice. He did not even receive the Holy Spirit, as do believers today. He walked away with the same problems he had before. But he had God's approval, and God's righteousness credited to his account.

### **Conclusion:**

The primary meaning of Hebrews 11:4 has to do with Abel's speaking to later generations of believers and potential believers. He says three things: man comes to God by faith, not works; man must accept and obey God's revelation above his own reason and self-will; and sin is severely punished. This is Abel's timeless three-point sermon to the world, which he has been preaching for thousands of years to those who will hear. It could be titled, "The Righteous Shall Live by Faith."

### **References:**

Sermon: Austin Duncan from Grace Church "The Voice of Faith"  
John MacArthur "New Testament Commentary Hebrews"