

2. After providing a brief overview of what faith is and how it operates, the writer turned to specific examples of faithful individuals throughout the salvation history leading up to Messiah's coming. And he began at the beginning, citing Abel as his first example, followed by Enoch (11:4-6). Starting his "roll call" this way makes logical sense, but the writer's statement in verse 6 hints at a larger reason for this approach: It suggests his intent to establish the foundational truth that faith pertains *strictly* to the living God who actually *is*, not information, concepts, theories, or personal notions concerning Him. Specifically, *faith is the essence of an authentic relationship between the Creator God and the human creatures who share His image and likeness*. Starting with Abel and Enoch, then, suggests several important truths:
- 1) First, it highlights that faith isn't dependent on God's full self-disclosure, a formal covenant structure, or one's exhaustive knowledge of Him. Though many argue that God initiated a "covenant of grace" with Adam at the time of the fall, the Scripture makes no such claim. God pledged a human "seed" to address the creational curse (Genesis 3:15), but this is far from a formal covenant, and the text nowhere refers to this pledge as a covenant. And, while Abel was not far removed from the pre-fall world and the intimacy his father enjoyed with God, he was born into the cursed world and the alienation and exile that now defined the relationship between God and His image-bearers (Genesis 3:22-4:2).
 - 2) Also, these initial examples of faith (Abel and Enoch) possessed no written revelation of God. Though the exact mode is unclear, the Scripture indicates that God communicated with Adam and Eve directly. Indeed, in their created state they had no need of written revelation, because they communed with God person-to-person. This sort of interaction continued after the Fall, but with a remoteness and decreasing frequency. Soon, the divine-human relationship became a matter of *mediation* through chosen representatives. Moses became such a one on behalf of Abraham's covenant offspring, but long before that, God chose Abraham himself to mediate His relationship with the entire human race (Genesis 12:1-3). The point, then, is that faith binds men to the living God, regardless of the means or extent to which He communicates with them.
 - 3) Starting with Abel and Enoch also underscores that faith has been constant and unchanged from the beginning. This is implied by the fact that faith is the essence of the divine-human relationship (even for the man Jesus), but the mention of these two early humans shows that the writer regarded *their* faith as one and the same with the faith to which he called his readers (ref. 10:35-39, 11:39-12:2). *This is not to imply, however, that the substance and content of faith hasn't changed through the ages; what is unchanged is faith's essential nature and operation*. This is a crucial distinction that answers the errors regarding faith that exist in the discontinuity of Dispensationalism and continuity of Covenantalism. It is the reason why the writer could direct his readers (and himself) to strengthen and nurture their own faith by drawing on the example of the faithful who preceded them, even while Paul set "faith" in contrast with "law," and insisted that faith didn't come until Jesus the Messiah came into the world (Galatians 3:23-25).

- 4) Lastly, starting his “roll call” with Abel shows that faith has always been the basis of acceptance with God. Again, this is implied in the fact that faith is the essence of authentic human relationship with God, but the writer stated it directly by insisting that “*without faith it is impossible to please God*” (11:6). What was true in the first century (ref. again 10:35-39), was also true at the beginning of human history and in every generation since (11:39-40); all who have gained approval with God have done so through their faith.

And so the writer began by reminding his readers that the faith of which he has spoken – the faith to which he has spurred them – is the faith expressed by their faithful fathers. Though its content has expanded with the progress of revelation and redemptive history, and its object is now the God who is known in Jesus the Messiah, it is the same faith in terms of its essence, quality and operation. This faith has always bound men to God.

- a. The author’s treatment of Abel’s faith is notably brief, spanning only one verse, and yet, it is pregnant with meaning and significance. It’s constructed as one sentence with three parts: the *matter* that demonstrated Abel’s faith; the *affirmation* of his faith; the *enduring testimony* of his faith.

The matter the writer mentioned is the one the Scripture itself highlights, namely the episode in which Cain and Abel each brought an offering to God (ref. Genesis 4:1-7). The fact that this episode is the sum total of the Scripture’s treatment of the two brothers underscores that its significance lay not in the offerings as such (one acceptable and the other not), but what they expressed about the men and their respective “faith” toward God. It was this difference that generated the hostility between them – the same hostility that, ever since, has partitioned the human race into two opposing camps determined by the presence or absence of faith. Thus this episode serves as the transition from the blessedness of Eden to the “new” world of human existence outside it. In that way, it provides a basic explanation and interpretation of the phenomena of division and hostility that characterize every dimension of human existence, sacred as well as secular.

And so the author didn’t cite the episode in Genesis 4 because it was the only one available to him to show Abel’s faith. Neither was he suggesting that Abel’s faith consisted in his “right” offering in contrast to Cain’s “wrong” one. Rather, He recognized it to be the appropriate starting point for his discussion of faith, just as it is the starting point the Scripture itself established for telling its story that reaches its climax with the man-child to whom faith looked all along.

Again, the writer’s assertion of Abel’s faith is very brief: “*By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain.*” Considered at a glance, this statement might seem to suggest what is here being argued against, which is that Abel’s faith consisted in his proper (“better”) offering. This perspective has led to all sorts of conclusions, a common one being that Abel’s offering was accepted because it was a blood offering, whereas Cain brought only an offering from his crops.

Such interpretations are problematic for various reasons, not least the fact that they tend to be *anachronistic*, reading back into the Genesis account sacrificial requirements that didn't exist at that time. But the most significant problem is arguably the perspective itself. First, it reinforces a confused relationship between faith and obedience. But it does so based on a wrong understanding of the very concepts of faith and obedience. This perspective rightly assumes that faith manifests itself in obedience, but it construes obedience as conformity to a divine standard, prescription or directive. Thus Abel demonstrated his faith by doing what God prescribed (i.e., offering a blood sacrifice), whereas Cain disobeyed His prescription, whether in terms of a blood sacrifice, or by not bringing the first and best of his yield. Faith most certainly *obeys*, but in the sense that obedience is *faithfulness*; it is conformity to the truth, not compliance with a requirement. Thus faith *is* obedience, and obedience *is* faith, even as faithfulness is the life of faith.

Treating verse 4 in isolation can lead the reader down a wrong path, but the writer wasn't concerned about this with his audience. For they were *Jewish* believers, and he knew they would interpret his words through the lens of the Genesis account. From this vantage point, there was little danger of them locating Abel's faith in the appropriateness of his offering.

- First of all, the scriptural record gives no indication that either man was required to offer his sacrifice. Rather, the Genesis text refers to the two bringing their offering "*in the course of time*," a phrase that denotes the general passage of time rather than a particular or appointed time (cf. 1 Kings 17:7; Jeremiah 13:6). It is comparable to the familiar expression, "once upon a time," and indicates only that a day came when the brothers each presented an offering to God.
- This phrase further suggests that their offerings were *voluntary*. The time of the offering wasn't prescribed by God, and neither was their form. The language and context of the Genesis account, together with the Hebrews writer's overall intent in this section, argue that these offerings were brought voluntarily as acts of worship apart from imposed obligation.
- The Genesis text further noted that Abel brought an offering from the "*firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions*," while Cain's offering was from "*the fruit of the ground*" (4:3-4). This language itself indicates that it wasn't the material of the offerings (animal vs. vegetable or blood vs. non-blood) that distinguished them in God's sight, but the hearts of the worshippers. The text describes Abel offering the very best of his animals – the "firstlings" and "fat portions," while being conspicuously silent about the content and quality of Cain's offering.

Abel's sacrifice was "better," not because it complied with divine prescription, but because it reflected a "better" heart. It was an offering *by faith*, meaning that it expressed Abel's sincere and unqualified devotion to the living God.

This was the reason Abel's offering obtained God's approbation – in the words of the Hebrews author, "*he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts.*" This assessment reflects the Genesis account, which records that "*the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering*" (4:5). And while the writer didn't explain the inferiority of Cain's offering (he noted only that Abel's was "better"), the Genesis account states that Cain didn't receive the Lord's approval as his brother did. The narrative gives no direct explanation for this, so that the reader might conclude that the offerings themselves determined God's disposition. But again, the way those offerings are described indicates that the issue went beyond them to the men who brought them.

There is no textual evidence for blood (animal) offerings prior to the Flood (ref. Genesis 8:20), although such sacrifices were common throughout the various cultures of the post-diluvian world, long before God devised and prescribed the Levitical sacrificial system. At the same time, the Levitical system included plant offerings as well as animal sacrifices, showing that there is nothing inherently improper or unworthy in them (Leviticus 2:1-16). Moreover, "freewill offerings," being voluntary, afforded latitude to the worshipper according to his own resource (Leviticus 22:21-23). Indeed, the Lord granted this latitude even to *sin* offerings (Leviticus 5:11-12). The devotion, dependence, humility and gratitude consistent with sonship – with *faith* – mattered more than the substance offered (cf. Hebrews 10:5-7, 13:15 with Psalm 40:1-8, 50:7-15, 51:17; Isaiah 1:1-15, 57:15, 66:1-2).

The Lord received Abel's offering because of who *he* was, not because it fit some sacrificial prescription, or even because it was of a higher quality than Cain's. The men themselves were the point of distinction, but not in the sense that Cain was an angry man with a murderous bent, while Abel was a good ("righteous") man. Both men were sons of Adam; Abel's righteousness was his right relation to God, even as Cain's reaction to God betrayed his true concern in his worship (4:6-7). It was this relational "rightness" that God affirmed when He accepted Abel's gifts.

Finally, the writer closed his treatment of Abel's faith by noting that his faithful testimony continues on: "*...through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.*" This statement is somewhat vague, and the writer provided no clarification. Because he was drawing from the Genesis account, many see it as an allusion to 4:10 and the idea of Abel's blood crying out from the ground. Verse 12:24 is cited as further support for this view. But here the writer was speaking about Abel's enduring testimony of faith, not his blood crying out for vengeance (ref. 12:1). Thus some have interpreted this statement as Abel's faith having secured for him a perpetual testimony through his inclusion in the scriptural record. But viewed within the overall context, the writer's meaning seems clear: *Abel's faith, exhibited in his eager, whole-hearted worship, stands as an inspirational example for all the faithful who have succeeded him.* He is the beginning of the cloud of witnesses that God has given to His children to establish and strengthen them in their faith and faithfulness. So he calls them to run their own race with endurance, with the promise that they, too, will then become part of that throng of witnesses.