

Faith Vs. Works (Cain & Abel)

Text: Gen. 4:1-16

Introduction:

1. The period from the Fall to the Flood, has been commonly called *the age of conscience*. Sauer prefers to call it *the period of general Divine revelation*, because this describes God's method of communication to man before the Law was given at Sinai. This period commenced with one family (Adam's) and ended some 1600 or so years later with one family (Noah's).
2. Of all the sons and daughters that Adam begat in his 930 years (Gen. 5:3-4), the Bible focuses on three important men; Cain, Abel and Seth. The first section of the chapter (Vs. 1-16) focuses upon Adam and Eve's first two sons – Cain and Abel. They would become significant characters in the Bible. In the New Testament, Abel is referenced 4 times (Matt. 23:35; Lk. 11:51; Heb. 11:4, 12:24) and Cain 3 times (Heb. 11:4, 1 Jn. 3:12; Jude 1:11).
3. Conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman was predicted in Gen. 3:15 and we see that tragically play out within the very first family. Cain was of that wicked one, a child of the devil (1 John 3:12) but Abel was a child of God.
4. We also see two competing approaches to God that would continue down to the present time. The way of faith and the blood sacrifice versus the bloodless way of human works.
5. It is important to recognize that there was an appointed time ("in the process of time"), place ("an offering unto") and way (blood sacrifice) in which man was to approach God after the fall. Evidently Adam and Eve had taught their sons that God was to be approached by means of a blood sacrifice. After all, that pattern was established by God Himself who performed the first sacrifice in order to provide Adam and Eve with an acceptable covering (Gen. 3:21).

*We will trace the drama that unfolded between Cain and Abel under **3 points**. We observe that there are:*

I. **TWO OFFSPRING DESCRIBED (VS. 1-2)**

Adam and Eve's first two children are briefly described in these verses.

A. **The Birthing of the Two Boys (Vs. 1-2a)**

1. Eve conceives and bears Cain (Vs. 1)
 - a. The *naming* at his birth. The name 'Cain' means "gotten" and is closely related to the word 'gotten' used by Eve. It is like Eve said, "I will call him **gotten** because I have gotten him from the Lord." There is that echo in the Hebrew language. The practice of giving names to children associated with some specific event is also found multiple times in Genesis (E.g., Gen. 4:25, 5:29, 17:5, 41:51 etc.).
 - b. The *reaction* to his birth. Evidently Eve was a woman of faith as she viewed this son as being a gift from God. Little did she know then that this son of hers, the very first child to be born on earth by natural generation would break and shatter her maternal heart grievously. Her enthusiasm may indicate that she was

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hopeful that he was even the promised seed of Genesis 3:15. Whatever the case may be, Eve clearly knew the Lord and had faith in His promise of a coming Saviour. Luther writes, "Though Eve was mistaken in her hope, her words show that she was a pious woman who believed the promise of the coming salvation by the blessed Saviour."¹ Tragically, Cain would turn out to be a murderer, not the Messiah.

2. Eve conceives and bears Abel (Vs. 2a)
 - a. The name 'Abel' means 'vapor' or 'vanity'. The same word is used frequently in the Book of Ecclesiastes. For example, "**Vanity of vanities**, saith the Preacher, **vanity of vanities**; all is **vanity**." (Ecc. 1:2) This indicates that by the time Abel was born, Adam and Eve had come to terms in a greater way with the vanity of the world in which they lived under the curse.
 - b. As it would turn out, Abel's name would go down in biblical history with honor on account of His godliness and faith whereas Cain's would forever be shrouded in infamy and shame.

B. The Business (occupation) of the Two Boys (Vs. 2b)

No two siblings are alike in a family and that is demonstrated by the different occupations pursued by these two boys.

1. Abel became a Herdsman.
2. Cain became a Husbandman.
3. Note: There was nothing wrong with either of these occupations. The point of the passage is not to teach that Cain chose an ungodly occupation but rather to demonstrate that there was only one way to approach God and Cain willfully and knowingly rebelled against that way, choosing to pursue his own approach to God.

II. TWO OFFERINGS DEDICATED (VS. 3-7)

A. Abel's Offering of Faith (Vs. 4)

1. The Attributes of the Offering (Vs. 4a) Each feature of Abel's offering was a beautiful picture of Christ the Lamb who would come. Four words describe this offering:
 - a. **Spotless** – Abel gave of the "firstlings of his flock". The 'firstlings' were the first-born lambs. This means he gave the best of his flock picturing the perfection of the Lord Jesus who would be described in the New Testament as the "lamb without blemish and without spot." (1 Pet. 1:19).
 - b. **Suffering** – the innocent suffers on behalf of the guilty. 1 Peter 3:18, "For Christ also hath once **suffered** for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit." Isaiah 53:3-4 "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of **sorrows**, and **acquainted with grief**: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he is despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our **griefs**, and carried our **sorrows**: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted."

¹ Cited by Sarfati, *The Genesis Account*, pp. 408-409.

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- c. **Substitute** – the innocent takes the place of the guilty. Jesus Christ took our place! Isaiah 53:5 “But he was **wounded for our transgressions**, *he was bruised for our iniquities*: the chastisement of **our peace** was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” Romans 5:8 “But God commendeth his love **toward us**, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died **for us**.”
 - d. **Slain** – the blood of the innocent shed for the guilty. The blood is the only way back to God for guilty sinners. Lev. 17:11 “For **the life of the flesh *is* in the blood**: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for **it *is* the blood *that* maketh an atonement for the soul**.” Hebrews 9:22 “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and **without shedding of blood is no remission**.”
 - i. We are purchased by the blood (Acts 20:28).
 - ii. We are justified by the blood (Rom 5:9).
 - iii. We are redeemed by the blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Rev. 5:9).
 - iv. We are forgiven by the blood (Eph 1:7, Col 1:14).
 - v. We are sprinkled with the blood (1 Pet. 1:2).
 - vi. We are washed in the blood (1 Jn. 1:7; Rev. 1:5; 7:14).
 - vii. We have remission through the blood (Matt. 26:28).
 - viii. We are made nigh by the blood (Eph. 2:13).
 - ix. We have eternal redemption by the blood (Heb. 9:12).
 - x. We have peace by the blood (Col 1:20).
 - xi. Praise God because of the blood, we are saved (Rom. 5:9)! As they hymn puts it so well, “Glory I’m saved!”
2. The Acceptance of the Offering (Vs. 4b)
- a. God accepted Abel – “the LORD had respect unto Abel”. The word ‘respect’ means “to gaze, regard with favor”. Why did God accept Abel? Because he came in faith by God’s appointed way, the way of the blood. If you come in faith by the way of the cross, you too will be forgiven and accepted by God.
 - b. God accepted Abel’s offering – “and to his offering”. God’s acceptance of Abel was inseparably linked to his offering of faith. The blood sacrifice formed the ground of his acceptance before God.
 - c. Heb. 11:4 “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, **by which he obtained witness that he was righteous**, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.”
 - d. C.H. Mackintosh writes, “In other words, he (Abel) entered, by faith, into the glorious truth, that God could be approached by sacrifice; that there was such a thing as a sinner’s placing the death of another between himself and the consequence of his sin, that the claims of God’s nature and the attributes of His character could be met by the blood of a spotless victim – a

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victim offered to meet God's demands, and the sinner's deep necessities."²

B. Cain's Offering of Works (Vs. 3, 5-7)

1. The Character of Cain's Offering (Vs. 3) Observe three features of Cain's offering:
 - a. It was **works-based** – Cain was a “tiller of the ground” and he brought “the fruit of the ground”, what He had produced through his own labour and efforts. No doubt the offering looked impressive from man's point of view but it would be found wanting by God.
 - b. It was **bloodless**. Cain rejected the way of the blood for the way of human works. He became the pioneer and founder of works-based religion which has dominated the world since then.
 - c. It was **manmade** – Cain evidently believed that man could make up his own way to come to God. Millions believe the lie that “all roads lead to heaven/God”. As Jude denounces false teachers in his fiery, one chapter Epistle, he describes them as having followed “the way of Cain”. Jude 1:11 “Woe unto them! for they have gone in **the way of Cain**, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core.” Man's way is the way of death (Prov. 14:12; 16:25) but God's way of life is through Christ (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12; 16:31).
 - d. C.H. Mackintosh writes, “Cain has had many millions of followers, from age to age. Cain-worship has abounded all over the world. It is the worship of every unconverted soul, and is maintained by every false system of religion under the sun. **Man would fain make God a receiver instead of a giver.**”³
 - e. Note: Do not fall for the misconception that this was an unfair situation where two brothers innocently brought their offerings and Abel just happened to get the luck of the draw with the right offering and Cain didn't like some kind of lottery! God's merciful appeal to Cain plainly shows that Cain was making a rebellious choice to not bring the offering God required (See Vs. 6-7).
2. The Rejection of Cain's Offering (Vs. 5)
 - a. God rejected Cain's works-based approach to Him, revealing His Eternal Mind and Character on the matter. God will never reconcile guilty sinners to Himself on the basis of works (Rom. 11:6; Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5). God's Word is clear, “without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb. 9:22).
 - b. Cain responded with wrath towards God rather than repentance. This inner anger manifested itself on Cain's countenance – “and his countenance fell”. The word ‘wrath’ has the idea of “to kindle, to burn hot”. Cain boiled with rage against God's rejection of his works. Man in his natural, sinful state revolts against the cross of Christ as the only way of salvation.
3. The Appeal after Cain's Offering (Vs. 6-7)
 - a. God reasons with Cain (Vs. 6-7a)

² C.H. Mackintosh, *Notes on the Book of Genesis*, p. 61.

³ C.H. Mackintosh, p. 60.

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- i. Despite Cain's rebellious response, God still offers mercy, an opportunity for Cain to submit to God's way of salvation. The first two questions God asked were rhetorical and required no answer. They were "designed to show Cain that he had no cause to be angry at God; rather, God had every cause to be angry at Cain, but was still merciful."⁴
 - ii. "if thou doest well" = a clear reference to the need to bring the right offering.
 - iii. "shalt not thou be accepted" = God would accept Cain just as He had accepted Abel. The ground of acceptance was not anything in the individuals. It was all contingent upon the right sacrifice.
 - iv. "And unto thee shall be his desire..." (Vs. 7b) = if Cain chose the right way, he would be included in the godly line that would eventually lead to the Messiah and would maintain his position as firstborn in the family with a measure of authority over Abel.
- b. God warns Cain (Vs. 7b)
- i. God adds a note of warning to His compassionate appeal – "sin lieth at the door". This is the first time the word 'sin' occurs in the Bible and it has the basic meaning of "to miss the mark". Sin is pictured as a ferocious beast, lying outside the door, ready to pounce on the unsuspecting victim. The same imagery is used in Gen. 49:9 – "couched as a lion". Leupold writes, "Sin has become a menacing threat. It is likened to a wild beast crouching at the door. And as promptly as such a beast immediately at hand would seize a man going out at the door, so promptly will sin leap upon one and hurt him."⁵
 - ii. The warning is clear. Cain is in a very dangerous position. He stands on a knife edge between restoration or destruction. As it turned out, sin did pounce on Cain due to his refusal to repent and he murdered his own brother.

III. TWO OUTCOMES DETAILED (VS. 8-16)

A. The Persecution of godly Abel (Vs. 8)

1. Abel's Message to Cain (Vs. 8a)
 - a. The details of Cain and Abel's conversation is not recorded but we have cause to believe that Abel reasoned his brother as the New Testament references Abel as the first prophet. At its heart, a prophet is one who speaks God's Word to others. Abel not only believed in God's appointed way through the blood sacrifice but was also a proclaimer of this truth.
 - b. Luke 11:50-51 "That **the blood of all the prophets**, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this

⁴ Sarfati, p. 414.

⁵ H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, p. 201.

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generation; From **the blood of Abel** unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.” (See also Matt. 23:34-35).

2. Abel's Murder by Cain (Vs. 8b)
 - a. The location of the murder – “when they were in the field”.
 - b. The reason for the murder. The New Testament provides the answer in 1 John 3:12, “Not as **Cain**, *who* was of that wicked one, and **slew his brother**. And wherefore slew he him? **Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.**” Cain killed Abel because he was convicted and exposed by his life and lips. Cain's anger and hatred lead to murder. Anger and hatred is the attitude and emotion of murder.
 - c. Note: History has been soaked with the blood of the martyrs since then. True believers have been subjected to vicious attack by the followers of the “way of Cain”. Works based religion has always been a violent persecutor of the way of faith. From Roman colosseums to Roman Catholic inquisitions, those who have followed in Abel's footsteps have been slaughtered.

B. The Expulsion of ungodly Cain (Vs. 9-16)

God now cross examines Cain and gives him Divine justice. Notice the steps:

1. Cain is Examined (Vs. 9-10)
 - a. Where is Abel? Cain responds with the first outright human lie in the Bible.
 - b. What have you done? God cuts through Cain's charade and provides evidence of his crime. God could hear the voice of Abel's blood, crying to Him from the ground. Lev. 17:11 reminds us that “the life of the flesh is in the blood”. The blood speaks to God.
 - i. The blood of martyred Abel spoke to God. The death of the saints is precious in God's sight (Ps. 116:15).
 - ii. The blood of Christ speaks to God. Hebrews 12:24 “And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and **to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.**” Praise God the blood of Christ speaks for me before the throne of God. It tells me I am forgiven and made righteous in Christ, pleading the mercy of God for me. It dispels the lies and accusations of the devil, declaring my sin record cleansed. It shields me from wrath and judgment, covering all my sin.
2. Cain is Sentenced (Vs. 11-12)

Cain is condemned to:

 - a. A life of hardship (Vs. 11-12a). Up until this point, Cain had been successful as an agriculturalist, now the ground would no longer yield a good crop for Cain. He would have to work harder than others just to survive. Because he spilt the blood of righteous Abel on the ground, it would no longer produce food for Cain.
 - b. A life of a fugitive (Vs. 12b). This is a secondary consequence from the first. As he would not be able to eke out a sufficient

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subsistence in one place, he would be condemned to the life of a desolate nomad, seeking to survive by moving about from place to place. Regarding the two words 'vagabond' and 'fugitive' Wiersbe explains them as follows: "A vagabond has no home and a fugitive is running from home."

3. Cain is Marked (Vs. 13-15)
 - a. Cain responds with remorse (Vs. 13-14). Cain is not repentant over his sin but is merely sorry about the consequences of his sin. He recognizes the severity of punishment in four ways:⁶
 - i. "driven...from the face of the earth" – Cain knows he has now lost his profession of farming.
 - ii. "from thy face shall I be hid" – loss of fellowship between God and Cain. Cain would now lose even the fellowship that had been possible at the place of sacrifice.
 - iii. "I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond" – Cain would now have no permanent abode.
 - iv. "every one that findeth me shall slay me" – the one who so viciously took his brother's life would be in fear of his own life. How ironic. The murderer fears being murdered!
 - b. God responds with a mark (Vs. 15). God put a visible mark on Cain that would be identifiable to others so they would know not to murder him. A punishment seven times more severe than Cain's would be meted out to any who killed him.
 - c. Note: In one sense this was a merciful act of God and in another sense, it was an act of judgment. It was merciful inasmuch as Cain's life was preserved. It was an act of judgment in the sense that Cain would be marked for life and remembered as the first murderer. Later, the death penalty for murder would be instituted by God (Gen. 9:6). Cain was consigned to a kind of living death as a warning to others of the sin of murder. "God's intention was clearly to impress the sanctity of human life and the enormity of the sin of murder upon mankind."⁷
4. Cain is Expelled (Vs. 16)
 - a. Cain is separated from God's presence, which is the essence of spiritual death. God is Omnipresent so this means that Cain departed from the Shekinah glory, the visible manifestation of God's presence at the gardens entrance.
 - b. All those who try to earn salvation by their good works will, like Cain, be eternally separated from God. 2 Thess. 1:9 "Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction **from the presence of the Lord**, and from the glory of his power;"

Conclusion: What are you relying on for your salvation? Is it faith in the finished work of Christ or are you trusting in your own good works?

⁶ Sarfati, p. 419.

⁷ Leupold, p. 207.