

## **FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS**

**Hebrews 11:4**

### **The Faith Chapter – Week 2**

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#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

- a. Right now we're in a sermon series on Hebrews 11 – The Faith Chapter. Hebrews 11 is all about faith. The point is to teach us about faith, and to motivate us to have faith no matter what.
- b. What have we learned so far about faith? **Hebrews 11:1** says, "Now faith is the assurance of what is hoped for, the conviction of what is not seen."
- c. There are two kinds of faith: Saving faith and living faith.
  - i. Saving faith is the kind of faith we need to begin the Christian life. It is the kind of faith required for salvation. It is placing your trust in Christ alone for salvation. It is the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian; heaven and hell. Being a very moral person, with all of the virtues – charity, honesty, purity, courage, love – is pointless without saving faith. You will simply be a very moral resident of hell. And there are many people who call themselves Christians but do not have saving faith, and therefore they are not saved; they are not true Christians. They are not going to heaven. But they don't even realize it. **2 Corinthians 13:5** says, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless you fail the test."
  - ii. Living faith is required to live a victorious Christian life. It is the difference between being a successful Christian or a defeated Christian. It is the difference between obedience and compromise; between overcoming temptation and giving in to temptation. It is the difference between prayer and prayerlessness. It is the difference between having a daily quiet time or skipping your quiet time. Living faith is the difference between standing firm in the truth, or caving under pressure. What is it? Living faith is confidence in God, that He is who He says He is, and that He will do what He says He will do.
- d. Hebrews 11 is all about living faith. **Hebrews 11:1** says, "Now faith is the assurance of what is hoped for, the conviction of what is not seen." In 1-3 it tells us what faith is. And in the rest of the chapter, it tells us why faith is important by giving us several examples from the Old Testament of people who displayed great faith.
- e. In Hebrews 11:4 we begin with our first example of faith – Abel.

#### **II. TEXT**

- a. **Hebrews 11:4** "By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith."

### III. EXPOSITION

- a. Who is Abel? Abel's story is told in Genesis 4:1-6. Cain and Abel were Adam and Eve's sons. They were a part of the first family on earth. Cain was a farmer, and Abel was a hunter. They both presented an offering to the Lord. Cain gave some of his produce, and Abel gave "some of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions." The Lord accepted Abel's sacrifice but rejected Cain's sacrifice. Cain became furious and depressed, so the Lord spoke to him.
- b. **Genesis 4:6** 6 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you furious? And why do you look despondent? 7 If you do what is right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."
- c. Then Cain told Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain murdered Abel.
- d. The age-old question is this: Why did God accept Abel's offering but not Cain's?
- e. There are three views:
  - i. Ritual. Some believe that Cain did not offer his sacrifice in the right way. It wasn't that God was displeased with the type of his offering, but with the way that he offered it. He didn't follow the prescribed method or pattern of presenting an offering.
  - ii. Substance. Some believe that Cain didn't give the kind of sacrifice that God wanted. That God must have give clear instructions that he wanted a blood sacrifice, which Abel obeyed, but instead Cain gave some of his produce.
  - iii. Character. While the first two views are possible, I think a third makes the most sense. When God told Cain, "If you do what is right, then you will be accepted," He wasn't referring to the right kind of sacrifice, but to the right kind of living. He was saying, "The reason I rejected your offering is because of your sinful character. If you will live a righteous life that is pleasing to me, then I will accept your offering."
- f. Let me give you four reasons this third view makes the most sense:
  - i. We know that Cain was wicked.
    1. Cain responded to God rejecting his offering with fury. It doesn't say who his fury was directed at, but the common assumption is that it was directed at Abel. However, it is also possible that he was angry with God. Either would be wrong.
    2. Cain ignored God's warning. Seeing Cain's anger and discouragement, God told Cain exactly what to do to please Him. But Cain ignored Him.
    3. Cain murdered his brother. He committed the first murder. It was especially evil because he intentionally deceived Abel; Abel was his brother; Abel was righteous man.

4. **1 John 3:11-12** “11 For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another, 12 unlike Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous.”
  - a. This passage tells us that Cain was “of the evil one,” and he murdered his brother because “his deeds were evil.”
- ii. We know that Abel was a righteous man.
  1. In Gen 4:7 God told Cain that if he did right he would be accepted. Since God accepted Abel’s offering, it proves that he was righteous.
  2. Hebrews 13:4 says that Abel “was approved as a righteous man.”
  3. 1 John 3:12 says that Abel’s deeds were righteous.
  4. In Matthew 23:35 he is called “righteous Abel.”
- iii. We know that God accepts a person’s sacrifice on the basis of their character.
  1. **Proverbs 15:8** “The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight.”
- iv. We know that God is not impressed with sacrifices, but with an obedient heart.
  1. **1 Samuel 15:22** “Then Samuel said: Does the Lord take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of ram.”
- g. The reason God accepted Abel’s sacrifice was because he was a righteous man, not because he gave a more impressive offering.
- h. So, what does Abel’s story have to do with faith. Hebrews 11:4 gives us three insights about righteousness.

#### IV. THREE INSIGHTS ABOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS

##### a. The root of righteousness.

- i. **Hebrews 11:4** “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith.”
- ii. Why was Abel’s sacrifice better than Cain’s? Because of Abel’s righteous character.
- iii. But this verse points out the root of that righteous character. Faith. “By faith Abel offered... a better sacrifice.”
- iv. The author’s point is that faith is important, it is essential, because it is the root of righteous character. Righteous character comes from, stems from, flows out of, is birthed out of, and is strengthened and motivated by faith.
- v. In the words of theologian J.I. Packer, faith is the animating principle from which righteous living springs. (J.I. Packer, *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*.)
- vi. Before we move on, we need to distinguish between two types of righteousness in the Bible.

1. Positional righteousness.
  - a. Our right standing with God.
  - b. This is also called justification, or judicial righteousness.
  - c. This is accomplished when you put your faith in Christ for salvation.
  - d. It has to do with the future judgment.
  - e. The moment you get saved God declares you legally righteous in His sight.
  - f. This is a guarantee, a promise, an irrevocable gift that when you die, you will go to heaven. When you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, rather than punish you for your sins, God will reward you for the righteousness of Christ and give you eternal life.
  - g. This kind of positional righteousness is received through faith.
  - h. **Romans 5:1** "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."
  - i. When it says that we have been justified by faith, it means not by works.
  - j. **Romans 4:5** "But to the one who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited for righteousness."
  - k. The Bible teaches that we are all sinners, and that no matter how hard we try to make up for it, if God were to give us our just desert it would be eternal hell. And there's nothing we can do for it. A murderer who does lots of good deeds is still a murderer and deserves capital punishment. A sinner who does a lot of good deeds is still a sinner and deserves eternal punishment. We cannot save ourselves. Faith is admitting that we cannot save ourselves, and believing that Jesus can save us. He died for our sins and rose again. Faith is trusting that Christ's death paid for our sins and justifies us before God.
  - l. That's positional righteousness.
  - m. But that's not the kind of righteousness that Hebrews 11:4 is referring to. It is referring to practical righteousness.
2. Practical righteousness.
  - a. Positional righteousness is our right standing before God, while practical righteousness is our right living before God.
  - b. This is also called ethical righteousness.
  - c. God demands that we imitate His character and obey His commands.

- d. God is the creator and deserves our obedience. Another word for creator is author. As our author, God has the authority to impose obligations on His creatures.
  - e. God demands righteousness – that we imitate His character and obey His commands.
  - f. Practical righteousness does not earn us salvation. Instead, it is the proper response to salvation. Out of gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice we pursue righteousness.
  - g. Practical righteousness is only possible because of salvation. When God saves us, He gives us a new heart with the desire and power to please God, and He implants the Holy Spirit in our hearts to help us to righteously.
  - h. When our text says that Abel “was approved as a righteous man,” it is talking about his practical righteousness.
- vii. And what the text is getting at is that faith was the root of his righteousness. Faith is what gave him the motivation and the strength to pursue righteousness. To put it another way. God accepted Abel’s sacrifice because he was a righteous man. Abel was a righteous man because of his faith in God.
- viii. Why is faith the root of righteousness?
1. Faith is believing that God has the right to tell you how to live; that He deserves to be obeyed.
  2. Faith is believing that the Bible is God’s word, and that the commands therein have divine authority.
  3. Faith is believing that God’s commands are for your good, not your harm. That living according to God’s commands will benefit you, your family, and the community at large.
  4. Faith is believing that God is holy, and that He cares about your behavior, and that even the smallest sins are very offensive to Him.
  5. Faith is believing that God is always watching and will hold you accountable, either rewarding you for righteousness, or punishing you for wickedness.
- ix. **J.C. Ryle**, a Christian pastor and author in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote about the connection between faith and righteousness in his famous book *Holiness*: “In walking with God, a person will only go as far as he believes, and no further. His life will always be in proportion to his faith. His peace, patience, courage, and works will all be according to his faith... Faith is the root of a real Christian’s character. If your root is right, your fruit will soon abound. Your spiritual prosperity will always be according to your faith. He who believes will not only be saved, but will never thirst. He will overcome, he will be

established, he will walk firmly on the waters of this world, and he will do great works." (*Holiness*, 186.)

- x. Show me a righteous person, a person who imitates God's character and obeys His commands, and I will show you a person who has strong faith in God. At the same time, show me a person who lives in sin; even a Christian who keeps falling into sin, and I will show you a person who has either no faith, or very weak faith in God.
- xi. Righteousness is always preceded by faith. Sin is always preceded by doubt. Anytime you willfully choose to violate God's commands, it is because of doubt. You are doubting God's authority; You are doubting that God's commands are best for you. You are doubting that God's word is true. You are doubting that God is watching and will hold you accountable.
- xii. To put it another way, faith leads to righteous living, and faith is required for righteous living. If you have true faith, then you will pursue a righteous life. If you are struggling to live a righteous life, it is because you lack faith.

**b. The reward of righteousness.**

- i. Righteousness has many rewards.
- ii. Recently we studied Psalm 1. **Psalm 1:1-2** says, "How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers! 2 Instead, his delight is in the Lord's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night." Psalm 1 is all about how to be happy; how to live the most abundant, satisfying, fulfilling, and happy life. Isn't it wonderful that our Heavenly Father knows that we want to be happy, and He has given us instructions on how to find happiness? What does it say is the key to happiness? Psalm 1 tells us to do two things – avoid wickedness and pursue righteousness. The chapter mentions five rewards for righteous living:
  - 1. Provision. **Psalm 1:3** says, "He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams." God will provide for all your needs.
  - 2. Usefulness: **Psalm 1:3** says, "that bears its fruit in its season." God will use you to impact others for Christ.
  - 3. Longevity. **Psalm 1:3** says, "and its leaf does not wither." God will prevent your life from being cut short.
  - 4. Success. **Psalm 1:3** "Whatever he does prospers." God will help you to succeed in life.
  - 5. Protection. **Psalm 1:6** says, "For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous." God will protect you from anything that is not good for you.
- iii. But Hebrews 11:4 tells us the biggest reward for righteousness.

- iv. **Hebrews 11:4** “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith.”
- v. “By faith he was approved as a righteous man.” This means that God approved of him. God applauded his faith. In other words, God was pleased with him. Abel, by his righteousness, pleased the Lord.
- vi. **Charles Spurgeon** wrote, “God has more respect for a person’s trust than anything else found in him, for the Lord has chosen faith to be the hand into which He places His mercies and salvation.” (*The Golden Alphabet.*)
- vii. As a Christian the most important thing in life is pleasing the Lord. That’s what we want most. When you think of all that He has done for us through the cross of Christ, and how merciful and gracious and generous He is to us every single day, as Christians we love Him and we want to please Him. In view of His mercies, we want to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. And the story of Abel tells that this is the reward of righteousness. As we pursue righteousness, God will be pleased.
- viii. But again, to pursue righteousness we must have faith.

**c. The remembrance of righteousness.**

- i. The third insight about righteousness is found at the end of Hebrews 11:4.
- ii. **Hebrews 11:4** “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith.”
- iii. Notice the last line: “and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith.” What does that mean? It means that although Abel died long ago, his life has continued to inspire others to live a life of faith and righteousness.
- iv. Do you know what a legacy is? A legacy is “something transmitted by... a predecessor from the past (Meriam-Webster).” When you die, you will leave a legacy. You will transmit or pass on something to the generations that follow you. It will either be a good example, an example of faith and righteousness, or a bad example – an example of doubt and wickedness. Your legacy will either inspire others to faith and righteousness, or you will influence those after you to be wicked.
- v. Let’s compare the legacies of Cain and Abel for a moment. What kind of legacy did Cain leave? Cain committed murder. The first murder. Nobody had ever committed murder before. But Cain taught all the generations after him that the way to handle your problems, or the way to handle people that bother you, is to kill them. Think of all the murder that has happened throughout world history. That all started with Cain. He introduced murder to the human race. He left a legacy of doubt, and envy, and murder. Now think about Abel’s legacy. Abel lived a life of faith and righteousness. Here we are, thousands of years later, and we are still finding inspiration in the

faith and righteousness of Abel. When people think of Cain, they have negative thoughts; when they think of Abel, they have positive thoughts.

- vi. Now, what kind of legacy do you want to leave? How do you want people to remember you?
- vii. The example of Abel says that if you will pursue a life of faith that results in righteousness, you will leave a good legacy. The generations who follow you will remember your life with fondness, and they will be inspired to follow your example.
- viii. In other words, you can continue to serve God and make an impact for Christ even after you die and go to heaven. How? By living a righteous life. People will remember you and be inspired to follow your example.
- ix. The Roman emperor Nero had it all in life. He was the richest, most powerful man on earth in his generation. But he was wicked. He was the first Roman emperor to persecute Christians. In fact, he was responsible for the martyrdom of the apostle Paul. Paul was not wealthy, or powerful. He suffered much for Christ. But he lived a righteous life. Both men died and left a legacy. Today, two-thousand years later, people remember Nero, and they remember Paul. How do they remember them? They name their dogs Nero and their sons Paul. Paul died many years ago, but his memory still speaks; he life still inspires people of every generation to live a life of faith and righteousness.
- x. If you want to leave a good legacy, then live a righteous life.

**V. CONCLUSION**

- a. God was pleased with Abel and accepted his sacrifice because he was righteous. He was righteous because he had strong faith.
- b. Let me repeat what I said earlier. Faith leads to righteous living, and faith is required for righteous living. If you have true faith, then you will pursue a righteous life. If you are struggling to live a righteous life, it is because you lack faith.