

Faith in Action

Week 4: Faith that is Genuine

Genesis 4:1-16

This is my brother, Chad (show picture). He's four years younger than me and for the most part, we got along pretty well growing up, but we definitely had our moments. I could play the role of the mean older brother and he was *really* good at being the annoying little brother! And, we both knew how to get under the skin of the other.

One time, I was maybe 12, Chad was 8, I don't remember what I said or did, but I must have crossed a line because the only thing I remember is Chad chasing me around our backyard with a baseball bat. And he was serious, too. I'm pretty sure if he would have made contact, it would have been a lethal weapon!

If you grew up with siblings, you probably have your own stories that you could share. Times when you made your brother or sister believe something that wasn't true, blamed them for something you did so that they'd get in trouble instead of you. A fun game I used to play with Chad around this time of year is shooting bottle rockets at him. He probably didn't enjoy it as much as I did!

If you have a brother or sister, most likely, you have a story to tell. A story that still gets passed along and is the stuff of legend in your family now. It's part of having siblings, and sibling rivalries are literally as old as time! And we should all be glad that our stories are not forever immortalized in the greatest selling book of all time, like the one we're looking at today. If you have a Bible, or a Bible app you like to use, turn there with me. Genesis 4.

We're in week 4 of our summer series called Faith in Action. And, our anchor text for this series mentions the sibling rivalry that we're talking about today. In verse 4, the author writes...(READ Hebrews 11:4)

Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. What does that mean? As we look at their story today, I think we'll find that it means the faith of Able still speaks as an example of genuine worship.

A little background to our text. God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden. It was the picture of perfection. They had everything they could ever want. Their relationship with one another and God was unhindered by pride or shame or brokenness and sin. They lived in perfect harmony with creation, and even within themselves there was a wholeness they enjoyed.

Unfortunately, it doesn't stay that way. Satan is crouching at the door, waiting for the perfect opportunity to place a desire in front of them that will distract them from the goodness of the Lord. Adam and Eve fall into his trap, and their sinful choice causes brokenness between them and God, each other, creation, even brokenness within themselves.

Now, they live in the land East of Eden. It's a land of thorns and thistles, sweat and blood. Their prideful decision to turn their back on God took them to a place of conflict and turmoil and pain. But, life goes on. And this is what we read in Genesis 4, starting in verse 1...(READ vs. 1-2)

So, Cain was born first and Abel came along later. He was the younger brother. And, I think all siblings have this complex that their parents prefer the other child, or children, and love them more, but there are some clues in our text that Abel may have had a case!

First, did you notice the declaration that Eve made over Cain? *"With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man!"* Meanwhile, Abel was almost an afterthought. *"Later, she gave birth to another kid..."* It's the OT equivalent of the 1st child having like a full scrapbook of pictures and memories and the 2nd child has, like, a box with some stuff crammed into it!

The second clue we see for why Cain may have been the favorite is that he took up the family business. He followed in his father's footsteps and became a farmer. Abel took care of animals.

And, listen, I might be reading into the text a little bit here, but I imagine Cain was probably pretty used to enjoying some preferential treatment in the family. He probably got the best and Abel got the leftovers. He got the new loincloth, Abel got the hand-me-downs. I imagine Cain knew he was the favorite and went out of his way to make sure Abel knew it, too.

And, when you're used to being the first, the best, the favored and favorite, it can be a little jarring when the tables turn. Verse 3...(READ vs. 3-4a)

We don't know how Cain and Abel knew to bring an offering to the Lord. It could be they were instructed, or it could be there's just something inside of us that was made to worship. There's something in us that wants to say "Thank you" to someone or something that created us and all the goodness around us.

Either way, somehow, Cain and Abel knew that Someone was the Lord and they worshipped him. But, while they both worshipped, there was something about their worship that was different. Verse 4...(READ 4b-5)

Why did the Lord favor Abel's offering over Cain's? Some have suggested it's because Abel's offering was a blood offering and Cain's was a grain offering, but the Lord accepted both as worship. I think something else is going on.

Verse 3 says that Cain brought "some of the fruits of the soil" for his offering. It's almost like he took a little off the top, almost as an afterthought, on his way to worship. The language gives the idea that there wasn't much of a sacrifice in his offering. Like he grabbed all the cans of peas off the shelf for the food drive.

Abel, on the other hand, brought the fat from the first born. He brought the Velveeta Shells and Cheese! Abel gave the best of what he had to offer. This sacrifice wasn't just skimming a little off

the top, he gave the first and best portion to the Lord. His offering required genuine sacrifice and worship.

And, maybe for the first time, Cain experienced a little jealousy. The brother who was used to being first, favorite, and best, watched as the other brother received the favor of the Lord. And it was more than he could bear. Even still, the Lord loves Cain and comes to him in his jealousy and pride. **Verse 6...(READ vs. 6-7)**

This is so fascinating to me. It seems like God wasn't nearly as concerned about Cain's offering as he was to his response when Abel got a shout out for his. It's almost as if the offering doesn't matter as much as the heart behind it. Something I think we see consistently throughout Scripture. ***What*** is given doesn't matter nearly as much as ***the spirit with which it is given***.

Seeing the sin of pride and jealousy and anger so easily aroused inside of Cain made God take notice. And like a loving Father, the Lord comes to Cain and warns him about the danger of sin. Hoping he won't fall into the same trap that his parent's did.

You see, God knows the damage our sin can cause us and others. Chances are, we know it, too because we've experienced it. We can probably all think of times when our own sin consumed us and the wake of hurt it caused. We can think of times our anger made us lash out at someone we love and cause a wound in their heart. Times when our pride made us get defensive instead of humbly listening to the other person. Lust drove a wedge in a relationship.

We know the dangers of our sin, and the authors of Scripture knew them, too. The Apostle Peter, who knew a thing or two about the deceitfulness of sin says in **1 Peter 5:8...(READ)**

James, the half-brother of Jesus, who knew a thing or two about jealousy and sibling rivalry, says in **James 1:14-15...(READ)**

Sin is constantly crouching at our door. Satan's only goal is to kill, steal, and destroy the good that God has for us, which is why the Lord is pleading with Cain to do what is right. And how does he respond? Spoiler alert...not well. **Verse 8...(READ)**

Cain hard-heartedness is revealed in his actions. It's seen in the shallowness of his offering, in the way he ignored the Lord's plea, and ultimately, in taking his own brother's life out of pride and jealousy. Cain's life and worship was more about him than it was God. It was a life that appeared to be faithful, but it was a faith that didn't require too much from him. Abel's worship, on the other hand, was genuine and sincere. His was a faith and worship that ended up costing him everything.

So, how does this account of Cain and Abel end? **Verse 9...(READ vs. 9-12)**

Cain's hard-heartedness continues to show. He lashes out at God, which is what we tend to do when our heart is full of pride and our sin is exposed. But, God already knows. Abel's blood is

crying out to him for justice, and the Lord, who doesn't leave sin unpunished, gives it. He tells Cain that, because of his sin, the ground that received his brother's blood would no longer produce life for him and the land he once called home would no longer be a place of comfort and security. He'll be cut off from everything and everyone he knows, including God, and will wander through life looking for meaning and purpose and a place to belong.

And, it's here that I think we start to see Cain's pride start to fall and he's convicted by his sin...(READ vs. 13-14)

That word for "Punishment" is used 230 times in the OT, and that's one meaning of the word. But, 220 out of the 230 times it's used, it's translated "Iniquity" or "guilt." In other words, Cain is crying out, "My guilt is more than I can bear" or "The punishment for my sin is more than I can bear." Either way, Cain owns up to his sin and its consequences. He confesses and, because of that, Even in his justice, God shows Cain mercy.

Cain knew that God's judgement over his sin would mean that someone would do to him what he did to his brother. So, in mercy, God protected Cain with a mark so would be protected and not get what he deserved.

And he does the very same thing for us. Our sin, and the way we've hurt others by it, cries out for God's justice. Romans 6:23 says that the wages of our sin, what we deserve for it, is death. Sin isolates us. It cuts us off from God and from others and in our pride, we can find ourselves wandering through life, looking for meaning and purpose and a place to belong.

But, the gift and mercy of God is that Jesus took our sin to the cross for us. He took the punishment and justice we deserved for it and, in turn, when we put our faith in Him, we are marked with the Holy Spirit that protects us and says we belong to God. We are no longer cut off from him.

The author of Hebrews goes on in chapter 12 and says that, when we turn to God and confess our sin, we come "to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Abel's blood cries out for justice, but the blood of Jesus cries out for mercy. Our sin demands God's justice, but Jesus bore the weight of our judgement so we could find mercy. The blood of Jesus speaks a better word over us. Instead of guilt and shame and separation, the blood of Jesus speaks love and forgiveness and grace over you.

So, how do we respond to a love like that? The Apostle Paul says in Romans 12:1...(READ)

In view of the mercy we have been shown, as an act of worship, we offer our lives back to God as a living sacrifice. A sacrifice as pure and genuine as Abel's. The question I've been wrestling with this week as I've prayed and prepared for this sermon is this...Are you giving God your best in worship?

And, I'm not just talking about when you come in here, though that's part of it. Paul says in view of God's mercy we offer our very lives as an act of worship to him. So, is your faith and the worship of your life like Abel's? Genuine, faithful, and sincere? Or is your faith and the worship of your life more resemble Cain's offering. It's a life that appears to be faithful, but it's a faith that doesn't require much from you?

Do you praise God with the right heart, or is this time more about you and what you want out of it? What I want?

When it comes to your finances, does God get the first and best of what you have to offer, or does He get what's left over, if there's anything at all.

At work, or in your home, do you worship God in the way you act and treat others? The way you respond to something unexpected or put the needs of others above your own?

At church, are you serving somewhere as an act of worship? Are you using your gift as part of the body of Christ to build others up and serve them? Our vision at Sherwood Oaks is to **Unleash the Church, you all, with the love of Jesus to make an eternal difference in the lives of at-risk people.** We want everyone in our church family to experience the joy of serving God and others as an act of worship, even if it requires sacrifice. That's why our goal for this next ministry year, as a church, is to **increase our number of volunteers from 516 to 1,000 by July 2024.**

If you've been on the sidelines, it's time to jump into the game and start serving! We've got lots of opportunities and part of your worship back to God could be stepping into one of those spots and serving others.

Abel still speaks as an example of genuine faith and worship. By God's grace, and in response to his mercy, your life can speak that, too. Your life can make an eternal difference in the life of someone else when they see you put your faith into action. When your worship is more than just words, but the way you live.