

Genesis (3)

Better Blood; Better Sacrifice



Stephen Gunawan

Abel: Justified by Faith

In Genesis 4, we are given a continuation story of the life of man, but after the Fall. Adam and Eve had sons; the older named Cain and the younger, Abel. The story went that Cain and Abel gave to the Lord an offering from their work; but the Lord accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's. Cain's jealousy got the better of him, and he killed Abel, his blood brother.

Now, sure, there are some speculations with regard to what had happened. The most theological speculation is that Abel's sacrifice was pleasing to God because he gave a firstborn lamb – a sacrifice which had a symbolic significance for the redemption of sin (and thus his act of sacrificing firstborn animal was an act of faith that relied on God's grace rather than his own merit). This explanation surely gives clarity to the revelation in **Heb 11:4** that *"by faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did."* But although this explanation has a probability of being true, none of the verse in the Bible explain it this way. Furthermore, **Genesis 4:2b** gives this detail that Abel kept flocks whilst Cain worked the soil. This makes it improbable that Cain's sacrifice was not accepted because he did not offer an animal sacrifice; for that would mean that he was expected to give from what he did not have.

But at least this was immediately available through the narrative. We are told that Abel *"brought an offering – fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock"* (**Gen 4:4**), while Cain *"brought some of the fruits of the soil"* (**4:3**). This may seem to indicate that Abel brought to the Lord the first and the best, whilst Cain only brought some of what he owned.

Whilst the interpretation that Abel offered a better sacrifice because his was an animal offering is actually plausible, it cannot be claimed as absolute. But how, then, was Abel's sacrifice "better"? Well, here's what we can deduce from Scripture:

- ***Abel's sacrifice was righteous.*** The apostle John explained things this way, *"Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous"* (**1 Jn 3:12**). Therefore, Cain's actions were evil, and Abel's were righteous. And this explanation corresponds exactly to God's own words to Cain: *"Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it"* (**Gen 4:6-7**). Now, herein, there might be a tendency to think that Abel's justification was in fact a justification by works – that literally, *"if you do what is right will you not be accepted?"* However, a further reading reveals a more accurate picture.
- ***That Abel's sacrifice was one offered in faith.*** This was literally what **Hebrews 11:4** tell us, that Abel's offering was better because it was "by faith." Whether or not Abel saw the animal sacrifice as something he ought to give because he saw how God had sacrificed an animal to cover his parents'

nakedness (**Gen 3:21**) is beside the point. But what is definite was that Abel gave the offering by faith - not relying on his own merit; and not thinking that the offering as somewhat contributive to God actually favoring him. Cain, meanwhile, viewed this sacrifice as religion; that God would somehow be pleased to bless him if he gave a good offering. He viewed the offering as a transaction – religious rites in exchange for blessing. But wait a minute. This is not said in the verse either, is it not? Well, not explicitly. But God’s own rebuke to Cain really revealed his heart’s intent. Cain became downcast, and even angry when his offering was not accepted (**4:5**). Now how could someone be disappointed in God, unless he places his personal expectation on Him? But who could demand of the Lord that He should bless us? That He should look in favor to anything that we do? That He should give blessing in exchange of devotion? No, He alone is the Lord and Master over all creation; who alone is sovereign over all His decision. And we are but His creatures, dependent upon Him but having no right to demand of Him. And is this not the same till this very day? In a rather extreme example, how many of us are taken in by the so-called Prosperity Gospel, and are then disappointed in God when He doesn’t bless us the way we expect Him to? What’s worse, such Prosperity Gospel even promises that God will multiply the value of our offering to Him. Such offering, although resembling faith; and even perhaps claiming to be faith; is not faith. But perhaps in a more reflective fashion, some of such disappointments do seem more understandable. Many Christians do suffer immensely and it seems unfairly. The righteous do suffer, and the wicked thrive. And we should empathize with such cases; though empathizing does not mean justifying.

Therefore, the story of Abel is actually a consistent Gospel message: That one is saved by faith alone, for good works. It is a faith that leads to good works; the nature of the tree revealed through its fruits. True, *“we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law”* (**Rom 3:28**). However, it is also true that *“faith without deeds is useless”* (**Jas 2:20**) and *“faith without deeds is dead”* (**Jas 2:26**).

But Paul explains things this way, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”* (**Eph 2:8-10**). Do you notice how Paul put it? We are saved “not by works,” but “to do good works.” The good works we do must flow out of our faith in God. That way, we do not have reason to boast in our good works, as if it contributed within us some sort of merit in God’s sight. But that way, our good works is the working of God within us, and thus to His glory alone. *“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”* (**Matt 5:16**).

Blood that Speaks

“Your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground” (**Gen 4:10**)

The Bible repeatedly mentions that the blood of Abel speaks. In this section we will attempt to discover what that means. So, first I will list all the verses that mention this:

- *“What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth” (Gen 4:10-12)*
- *“And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar” (Matt 23:35)*
- *“Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all” (Luk 11:50-51)*
- *“And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead” (Heb 11:4b)*
- *“You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:23-24)*

The question then, is this: What did the blood of Abel speak about? And what is it speaking about now?

The blood of Abel, grouped together with all the righteous blood of Old Testament prophets, are all innocent blood that was unjustly shed. They did not deserve to die, but died anyway. So they cried to God, “justice!”

And God listens. He listened to Abel’s blood, and is listening to all of the innocent blood shed by His saints, who are seeking justice from the Judge of all. And God assures, *“it is mine to avenge; I will repay” (Deut 32:35)*. Justice will be done, and God, the just Judge of all will ensure of it.

But then, when it comes to the New Testament, something shifted. And this is given to us in **Heb 12:23-24** - *“You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”* Here the blood of Abel is compared to the blood of Christ. Both speaks, but the blood of Christ speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Now, the blood of Christ was also innocently shed. In fact, Christ was the only Person in history who was completely and totally sinless; and that makes the shedding of His blood the greatest injustice ever committed. And therefore, Christ had the utmost right to give the loudest cry, “justice!” And “vengeance!” But instead of speaking those words, the blood of Christ cried this, “Father forgive them!” Christ cried “grace!” and cried “mercy!”

And so, this was what happened. Christ said in **Matt 23:35** and **Luk 11:50-51** that the cries of justice that was accumulated through all ages from all the people of God (from Abel to Zechariah) was going to be charged to the generation of the days of Jesus Christ. Imagine every cry of vengeance being charged to that generation. What wrath were they supposed to incur? What tragedy awaited them? What horror? We can’t begin to imagine the punishment that would befall us when justice is counted against us. *“If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord who could stand?” (Ps 130:3)*. But as Judge, God does keep a record

of sins; to be charged against those who do sin. And God did charge the sins of the people. He did repay. He exacted vengeance. So how come none of the people of Christ's days felt the punishment?

This was because the punishment which was supposed to be charged into our account was charged to another. It was charged to Jesus Christ, and He incurred the full, unhindered wrath of God on the cross! In **1 Jn 2:2** (ESV), we are told that *"He is the propitiation for our sins."* Now, propitiation is the appeasement of wrath through an offering. Now look at **Psalm 7:10-13**, and look at the cross this way. On the cross, God no longer relented. In fact, He sharpened His sword, bent and strung His bow. He prepared His deadly weapons; and made ready His flaming arrows. He displayed the full measure of his wrath; and His justice was satisfied. All of the injustice; all of the blood that cried out from righteous Abel to Zechariah was taken into account, and someone took full responsibility. But we were not the ones who were judged that day. Christ bled on the cross; but instead of crying out for justice, the words that came from His mouth was, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Christ took it upon Himself to become the Lamb of God that took away the sins of the world; and His blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And so, the verse we have just read (**Heb 12:23-24**) mentions how we have come to God; the JUDGE. But not only Him. We have also come to Christ, the MEDIATOR of the new covenant. The Judge demanded justice; the wrathful punishment for sins. And this is the nature of judges; right up to this present day. If a judge fails to give the rightful punishment for a crime, he acts unjustly and fails as a judge. And a judge cannot and will not spare a person's crime; even one done unintentionally and one from whom the offender repents. When one offends the law, punishment needs to be exacted to the person. And when God the Judge counts sin, who could stand? But Christ the Mediator stood in between, and incurred all the wrath that was rightfully ours to bear. And because of that, the mercy of God was made possible. *"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve You"* (**Ps 130:3-4**).

Abel's blood spoke, and it cried out for justice. Christ's blood cried out, and it bore the justice of God and gave way to mercy. This was why Christ's blood spoke a better word than that of Abel.

Responding to the Call

Now, because of this once and for all perfect sacrifice that Christ offered to God, God's grace and mercy could be given to all men without making it unjust. But this also means that we can only face God as our Judge only when Christ is our Mediator. This is why it is said, *"whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them"* (**Jn 3:36**). Would you, this day, trust in this blood of Christ, who speaks a better word than the blood of Abel?

Soli Deo Gloria!