

You may be surprised – even shocked – as we restudy

THE SACRIFICES OF CAIN AND ABEL

Cain and Abel, the firstborn of mankind, offered sacrifices in worship to God. Cain offered the fruit of his labors from the field while Abel offered the fruit of his labors from the flock. Abel and his worship were accepted by God while Cain and his offering were rejected. We read: "*In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of the flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard*" (Gen. 4:3-5). Improper inferences drawn from this brief account have greatly misdirected our understanding of acceptable worship.

Why was one sacrifice accepted and the other rejected? Was it an arbitrary choice on God's part? Few of us would conclude that God acts in such partial and arbitrary ways.

Generally, it has been concluded that Cain's sacrifice was rejected because he did not, like his brother, offer a blood sacrifice in an effort to atone for his sins. But I, and others who are smart like I am, have offered a different explanation which goes something like this: Abel offered by faith (Heb. 11:4); faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17); so Abel did what God told him while Cain did not. Cain, according to my explanation, might have offered the wrong thing, the wrong amount, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, in the wrong way, with the wrong attitude, or for the wrong purpose. He had many possibilities for displeasing God! A sort of Russian roulette in reverse! What a fearful approach to worship!

However, more recently, while reading Hebrews 11:4 through my accustomed theological glasses, something happened. I don't know if my glasses slipped or if the truth just jumped from the page and knocked them off but, without those tinted lenses, I saw the passage in a different light. Let me tell you what I saw.

Other persons in history have offered blood sacrifices in abundance and found their worship to be displeasing to God. To a sinful nation that had forsaken the Lord, God cried out through Isaiah, "*What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of he-goats*" (Isa. 1:4, 11). A similar rejection of Israel's sacrifices was uttered through Jeremiah (Jer. 6:20). Hadn't God commanded those offerings? Yes, he had, and they were blood offerings.

The Lord was a witness against his evil people (Micah 1:2) by rejecting their offerings: "*With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' He has showed you, O*

man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:68). They had forsaken righteousness of the heart -- justice, kindness, humility -- and were seeking to attain it through prescribed rituals of worship. Does that sound familiar?

God bore witness of their righteousness or wickedness by accepting or rejecting their sacrifices. It was not the details of the offerings that were being inspected but the heart of the worshipper. It has always been true that *"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight"* (Prov. 15:8). *"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with evil intent"* (Prov. 21:27).

The man was being judged rather than his offering. *"And the Lord had regard for ABEL and his offering, but for CAIN and his offering he had no regard"* (Gen. 4:4f). Notice that it does not read: "The Lord had regard for Abel's OFFERING. but for Cain's OFFERING he had no regard." The emphasis is on the man: "The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard."

Now, let us look at Hebrews 11:4 again: *"By faith Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts."* God bore witness to Abel's righteousness by accepting his gift.

By his rejection of Cain and his offering, God bore witness, not to an improperly detailed ritual of worship, but to the wickedness of the man. Many centuries later, John, the apostle, recognized Cain's evil nature and urged *"that we should love one another, and not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous"* (1 John 3:11f). Cain was evil in heart, and the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. John does not say that Cain was evil because he killed his brother, but that he killed his brother because he was evil already. John indicates that he did not love. Hatred toward his brother before he offered brought God's rejection and was the motivation for his murderous action.

Abel did not make an offering to achieve righteousness. He was righteous already because of his faith. God bore witness to that fact by accepting him and his offering.

Cain, on the other hand, evidently sought to achieve righteousness by rituals of worship when he was evil in heart. Does that sound familiar?

That was a problem in Jesus' day also. Because of their obstinacy the Jews kept traditions which nullified laws, and then they had the audacity to worship. So, Jesus rebuked, *"You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men'"* (Matt. 15:7f).

Jesus addressed the worshipper who might have anger or disrespect of his brother: "*So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift*" (Matt. 5: 23f). The frightening lesson is about worshipping God with an evil heart rather than slipping up on some ritualistic detail.

Unfortunately, we have followed Cain's philosophy in too many instances. We have endeavored to be righteous by scrupulously keeping holy details of ritualistic worship. Instead of worship being an expression from upright lives, we have made it an effort to please God through certain formal exercises. It is not, for example, a matter of refraining from singing during the Lord's Supper and from participating in it on weekdays, or from singing with instrumental accompaniment or singing a solo, but of worship flowing from clean hearts.

Although the Genesis account tells what each man offered, it does not indicate that acceptance or rejection was due to what was offered. Each man offered the fruit of his labors. That is in harmony with our responsibility toward our talents and of God's acceptance of what a man has and not what he has not. In certain cases, God has specified details of worship, but men have also worshipped acceptably through actions neither commanded nor instructed by the Lord.

Because Abel acted "by faith" does not necessarily mean that he had been instructed concerning his offering. It is common to misapply Romans 10:17 here: "*So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ*" (KJV). Paul is here defending the acceptance of Gentiles. The promise was that "*everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.*" How was it that they came to believe and be saved? They must have heard; so God had sent the preachers who had gone at the word, or command, of the Lord in the Great Commission, not on their own initiative. So, God was responsible for their belief. Exercises of worship are not under consideration in this passage.

AT THIS TIME I DO NOT RECALL AN INSTANCE IN THE BIBLE RECORD WHERE GOD REJECTED THE SINCERE EXPRESSION OF WORSHIP OF ANY RIGHTEOUS PERSON, EVEN THOUGH HIS PARTICULAR ACTS OF DEVOTION WERE NOT COMMANDED OF GOD.

In the various ages in Biblical history, there are examples of persons offering worship accepted by God even though their acts of worship had not been commanded. All people in all ages have been granted the privilege of praise. God has expected, and accepted, sincere worship even from those who had no direct or written revelation. He has looked upon the heart of the worshipper more than the technique of his praise. Men have been permitted to worship in methods that expressed the feeling of the worshipper's heart so long as it accomplished the purpose of praise while avoiding sacramental and idolatrous concepts and the veneration of objects.

But what about Nadab and Abihu? They were killed for offering strange fire. These men had been given complete and detailed instructions which they defied (Lev. 10:1f; 16:12). They were in defiance rather than in sincere misdirection. Uzzah's death (2 Sam. 6:3) was not due to wrong worship but in wholesale abandonment of specified law.

Consider these examples of acceptable worship through actions not commanded. In the time of Enosh men began to call upon the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:26). Abram built an altar and called on the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:8). Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, made an altar of it, and poured an offering of oil on it (Gen. 28:18). Wine was added to the Passover feast (Luke 22:14; Matt. 26:26-28). David danced before the Lord in worship (2 Sam. 6:12f; Psalms 149:3). Samuel drew water and poured it out before the Lord (1 Sam. 7:6). If these examples are thrown out because they were in "pre-church" times, then appeal to Nadab and Abihu would be further invalidated.

According to rules we have made, Paul sinned in cutting his hair in a ritual relating to a vow and when he purified himself ritually and arranged for an offering in accordance to the Law of Moses. We would also have to censor the Judean disciples who were all "zealous for the law" (Acts 21:23-26). There was no hint of disapproval. Shall we in our wisdom make laws for God? Shall we define which expressions of sincere worship are acceptable to him and which are displeasing so as to bring his judgment?

Previously, the tint of my theological glasses allowed me to see in the story of Cain and Abel a severe warning that I not slip up on any ritualistic detail and thereby fall short of attaining righteousness and God's approval. Without those glasses, however, I can see that righteousness, which is graciously imputed because of faith, will bring forth loving rituals of adoration and spontaneous expressions of praise for what God has done for me. I trust that he will bear witness that I am already righteous because of his offering. I cannot achieve it by my correctness of worship. []

This is a revision of Chapter 4 of "*Free As Sons*."

(Cecil Hook; June 2004. 905 Forest Canyon Cove, Round Rock TX 78664)