

Title: Pleasing God¹
Text: Hebrews 11.4-6
Theme: Pleasing God by faith
Series: Hebrews #36
Aim: My aim is to convince my people that God is good and loves to (and demands to) be totally believed.
Prop Stmnt. It is only by faith in God's promises that we can please God.

Read Text:

This chapter as a whole is marked by the phrase, "by faith." It is found at the beginning of verses 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 27, 28, and 29. The first occurrence in v.3 is the verse that I left off with last week. It provides us with the lens through which we can view the people whose stories are retold to us. So, let's go back to verse 3 for just a second.

Look at that last phrase "what is seen (creation) was not made out of things that are visible." So, if creation was not made out of things that are visible, that means that creation was made out of that which is invisible – right? Ok, now look at the first part of that verse. "...we understand that the universe was created by the word of God..." Since the universe was made out of the word of God, then the Word of God must be the "invisible power that produces visible results."²

Now, note this. In the beginning, God spoke and BAM things happened. And when I say things happened, I am speaking of galaxies that hurled into space, along with planets in motion. Here on our glorious home, mountain ranges rose to attention, beluga whales, bowhead whales, blue whales, baleen whales and thousands upon thousands of other species filled the waters that had just recently filled the earth. On the ground and in the sky, fascinating specimens dazzled and danced to the thunderous delight of the angels who watched in awe the creative acts of God. What power is this that speaks and creates? What instrument could there possibly be that can measure the sheer force of his words? The authority of his word is absolutely awesome. This same God who spoke the world into existence has with that same authority pronounced commands and spoken promises.

The speaking is invisible, but the result is certain. Unlike creation where there was an instantaneous result, now, there is a gap between the promise and the fulfillment. We live in the gap. And how do we live in this gap? We live by faith because *faith is that which securely fastens the believer to the reality of what he has not yet seen*. Let's improve on that just a bit. *Faith is that which securely fastens the believer to the reality of the promise of God that has not yet been seen because it has not yet been fulfilled*.

The word of God and the promises of God are absolutely unbreakable. That is why they are real, while at the same time unseen. Now, there are a number of promises that God made that have been fulfilled. At one time they too were real, and yet not seen. We have

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² Peter O'Brien, p. 402

the vantage of looking back and seeing now what other believers did not see. Their faith in the yet to be fulfilled promises of God call to us and compel us to do the same.

This morning we are looking at the first two examples of faith – Abel and Enoch. Abel’s example of faith is a picture of saving faith. His faith illustrates for us how we actually become part of the people of God. It is by faith that we come to God. It has always been that way. Enoch’s faith illustrates growing, sanctifying and persevering faith. He models how we continue to live by faith. We come to Christ by faith and we continue by faith.

1. By Faith we come to God. (4)

Abel was the second son of Adam and Eve. He was also the first homicide victim in history. His brief account is recorded in Genesis 4. It is so easy for us to minimize the impact of Genesis 3 and the rebellion of Adam and Eve against the Word of God. “Oh yea, they ate that fruit thingy and God kicked them out of the garden. Too bad – eh?” The very next recorded story is the incident of Cain murdering his younger brother, Abel. The whole thing is absolutely astounding.

Read Text: Genesis 4.1-10

Genesis 4 tells us that Cain’s area of work focused on agriculture and Abel’s focus of work was on shepherding. Cain offered to the Lord some of his produce and Abel offered to the Lord some of his flocks. At this point in the story, there is nothing mentioned about what, if any instructions that God had given to them about how He is to be approached in worship. Because they both offered sacrifices, I think that we can reasonably conclude that God had told them, at least that much.

But we know this; Cain’s offering was not acceptable to God and Abel’s was. Why? Genesis 4 gives us some hints but does not come right out and say does it? Many have speculated that Cain did not bring the type of sacrifice that God had required, but the text does not mention that, and later when the Levitical sacrificial system is established in Israel, both animal and agricultural offerings are included, so I don’t think that is really the point. What God does focus on, is the fact that Cain’s heart is not right with God. God would not accept Cain’s offering because it was not really an offering. He wasn’t giving to God – really. He was doing something because he had to. He was going through the motions, but his heart was not engaged in this and God was not and still does not accept heartless, perfunctory, just going through the motions “worship” because that is NOT worship. God is worth your whole-hearted belief, affection and obedience and will not settle for anything less. Abel on the other hand really believed God and obeyed him from the heart, the point that the author of Hebrews makes.

A. Faith believes and obeys from the heart

But when Abel offered a sacrifice that was pleasing to God, Cain became angry and pouted, and brewed, and stewed and simmered. The faith-driven obedience of his brother revealed the faithless, works-righteousness attempt on his part. Beloved, look at this!

Cain offered the fruit of his hands as an expression of what he could do to deservedly and rightfully demand the approval of God. And when God did not give him what he demanded, he was livid!

God, then, graciously and mercifully came alongside of him and asked him to examine his own heart (Genesis 4.6). “Why are you angry?” What do you want that you don’t have? That is a great question, isn’t it? How many of you are in a depressed state? You are brooding and pouting because life has not given you exactly what you think that you ought to have? That is the heart of a Pharisee? A Pharisee says, “I am (better than others) or I do (more than others) therefore I deserve!” You see, Cain was the first Pharisee.

Read Text: Matthew 23.29-25

Here, the Pharisees identified themselves with the Prophets of old claiming to be in the line of the faithful. Christ pointedly demonstrates to them that they are in the line of those, like Cain, who murdered the righteous because the righteous exposed their self-centered hearts. Cain is the head of the line of people who instead of repenting at their failures choose to throw stones at others who make them look bad. You see, when you are trusting in what you do, it is never good enough and you are always vulnerable to someone else, whom you fear is going to look better than you. Cain and the Pharisees and some of you are miserable people and you cannot enjoy the success of others. You live threatened by others because it reveals to you that your good is not good enough. Well, the truth is, your good is not good enough. Your efforts are never acceptable to God, but when you by faith believe God and then with a heart of belief, obey God then He enjoys and rejoices in that. Bottom line is this. Cain went through the motions of worship and Abel believed God from the heart and offered a sacrifice that reflected it. In fact, back in Genesis 4 it says that he (Abel) offered “the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.” He did not give leftovers, not because he had to be told this, but because his worship was faith-driven and heart-driven. He believed God and therefore did not want to hold anything back. But there is another aspect of Abel’s faith that speaks to us.

B. Faith commends us as righteous.

Do not forget that back in 10.38, the author of Hebrews has pointed out again the connection between faith and justification. This is our story, this is our song, this is our hope, and this is our foundation. We are declared righteous by God when we, by faith alone trust in that which God has revealed. In the OT, God revealed his promises. In the NT, it is Christ who has been revealed, who is the One who fulfilled the OT promises and is the One whom we trust. In the OT, the believers were the ones who put their faith in what God had revealed – promises. In the NT, believers are the ones who put their faith in what God has revealed (Christ). Abel trusted God and the evidence of his trust was displayed in his offering. Therefore, Hebrews 11.4 says, “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.” Notice that there is a connection between faith and works. Abel offered. Able acted. But, it was not the action itself that pleased God (Cain did that too). It was the heart of belief that drove the action that pleased God. Now, if you say that you have a heart of belief, but there is no evidence in your life to support that,

then you have a false faith and are fooling yourself. Faith that believes God is commended by God. Faith that believes God from the heart is that to which God responds by declaring us righteous. That is the case for Abel. He was commended as righteous. Notice the next phrase in v.4. "...God commending him by accepting his gifts." God would not accept Cain because it was not good enough. God accepted Abel's because it was. But it was not so much the gift as it was the giver. God received pleasure from Abel's gift because he took God's promises to heart.

Now, here is where the story really turns from bad to worse. This scene exposes Cain's heart. He looks bad. But think about it, who does he look bad in front of? It's not like he was embarrassed in school. Instead of dealing with his own heart, he blamed Abel. Abel was the problem! Abel's faith exposed Cain's unbelief. So, Cain, so blinded by rage, murdered his own brother! For hundreds of years, religious people, trusting in their own works have been enraged at the exposure of their sin by the pure faith of others and have done everything they can to get rid of them. The OT is full of stories of prophets being murdered. All of this culminated in the rejection and hatred and subsequent murder of Christ. Faith in God's promises will put you in a category where you are despised by some, and yet declared righteous by God. Which do you want? You cannot have both.

C. Faith's voice speaks forever (4b)

Abel's faith still speaks today. He stands as the head of the line of those who have chosen to align themselves with God's promises. He trusted in the unseen promise and God commended him as righteous, and though he was murdered and his life on this earth was cut short, his death took him to his real home. Do you see how this example would speak volumes to the people who read this letter? They had brothers who were trapped in the legalistic jaws of works-righteousness, who were accusing them of being betrayers and being wrong because the faith of these believers was revealing the self-centeredness of their own hearts. The rejection they experienced and the persecution that they were going through was intense and discouraging. Yet, here the AH says, you are in the Abel club. You are in good company. Listen to the voice of Abel. Press on pilgrim, it is worth it.

It seems to me that the AH has selected Abel for several reasons. 1) His life illustrates Christ, who was rejected by his people because of the integrity of his life. 2) Abel's life and earthly result is something that these Hebrews can identify with. 3) God, could have obviously stepped in and stopped this murder from taking place, but did not, just like he was allowing the persecution of these believers to run its course. 4) Abel's life is an example of justification. We are saved by faith, and we walk by faith. That is the point of Enoch's example.

2. By Faith we walk with God (5)

Enoch's very, very, very brief story is told in two very, very, very brief verses in Genesis 5. Fact is; Genesis 5 is one of those genealogical chapters that you are tempted to glaze over in your Bible reading. But, if you do, you miss a thunderbolt! First of all, God told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, they

would die. So, Genesis 5 is a recorded of all of these deaths. Over and over you read, “and he died.” But, right in the midst of this listing we read this. “Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah...” Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.” That’s it. The point is, Enoch did not die because one day while he was walking with God, they just walked home together and Enoch never came back.

Now, I don’t have time to go into this too much, but it looks like Enoch came to faith in God at the birth of his son. And, when Enoch passed from this life to the next, he was very, very young for his era. The Author of Hebrews gives us a bit more information in verse 5. So, when you put it together the picture is rather clear. Enoch came to God by faith and by faith he walked with God, which was such an incredible pleasure to God that God simply took him home one day. His time was done. Notice the profound similarities and the profound differences between Enoch and Abel. Both were “by faith.” Both believed in the unseen promises of God. For that, Abel was murdered and Enoch did not experience death.

Now, how many of you are sitting here thinking, “I’ll take the Enoch card please.” Remember, Enoch left this earth much sooner than most others around him, but just as Abel is part of our story and something that people of true faith have experienced for centuries, there is also a sense in which Enoch is our story too. You see...

A. And will not see death (like others experience death)

Death for the believer is different than death for everyone else. While we do not get to avoid the process or the event itself, we, nonetheless will not experience it like others. Those who have by faith trusted in Christ, evidenced by a life of faith, “even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil.”

B. And will dwell with God forever.

Like Abel, Enoch is a picture of Christ. At the end of Christ’s time on the earth, which did include death and resurrection, Christ too, went home. His ascension was his going back home. This is good to think about. And it is this promise, this yet to be fulfilled promise, this unseen promise that we believe, and that spurs us on to perseverance. We live now in anticipation of the reality that is yet to come but that is promised. We live now in consideration of that day when with God we will look back to this day. How will we then wished we had lived now. Living now, as we will then wish we had lived based on all that we then see and realize is what it means to live by faith.

3. Only by Faith can we please God. (6)

This is the great divide. There are only two types of people in this world; people of faith and people of unbelief. In a sense everyone has faith, but only those who have legitimate faith are really people of faith. People who follow a faith of their own making or a faith of someone else’s own creation, or a distortion of the truth faith are people of faith, but it

is a false faith. But, the true people of faith are people of faith the way God has designed and defined faith.

This verse is clear. It is impossible to please God apart from faith. It is impossible to draw near to God apart from faith. God made us so that we would draw near to him. God made us in order for us to know him and walk with him and enjoy him and be with him. But, in order for that to happen, you must 1) believe that he exists AND 2) you must believe that he rewards those who seek him.

Now, before you blow past that first one, remember what we have been through just in this little book. If you say, "Oh yea, I believe in God" you really need to ask yourself if you believe in this, the one true God who has spoken the word into existence, who has spoken promises who has revealed himself through the person and work of Christ, the Son of God and God the Son. Do you believe in this God who has said, you are a sinner who deserves my just and righteous wrath but instead of pouring out judgment upon you for ever and ever, I, compressed that wrath into such a furious expression that it was in a matter of hours poured out completely upon my Son, who took it all upon himself in your place when he died on the cross. Do you believe this God! Do you believe this God that though infinite in holiness and majestic in power is rich in mercy and mighty to save? Because you not only must believe that he exists as He has revealed himself, but you must also believe that he rewards those who seek him. And what is that reward?

Look back at Abel. Look at Enoch. Look ahead to Abraham to whom God said, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward." God rewards those who believe him, with...Himself. He is the reward!! God is the ultimate prize, the ultimate satisfaction, the ultimate love, the ultimate acceptance, the ultimate security, the ultimate treasure, the ultimate joy and our soul's ultimate delight. Right now, we are in the gap between that promise and that fulfillment. But beloved, pressing on as a pilgrim means that we live, banking on the reality that God's invisible Word guarantees visible results.