

"Faith Directed to the Promises of God"

Hebrews 12:15-17, 22-24

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Well, look at him now! This shepherd has been struck and all his sheep have gone astray. No longer is he able to care for them as he once had. As a man whose breath is now leaving him and whose blood drips to the ground, he doesn't look much like the one whom the Lord God favors. His father was not able to protect him as even now his body bears the marks of the instrument I used to bring about his death. What good did his sacrifice do for him now that he no longer moves?

Why, I believe that the Lord God had even declared him to be perfect. Him -- perfect! In all truth, he was the one who was the renegade. He went out there into the countryside chasing after his flock -- stupid sheep! I, on the other hand, I, took up the same occupation that my father had. I learned to work in the fields as my father does day after day. The work is back-breaking and the yield is limited because of insects, weeds, poor soil conditions, and lack of water. Not only has the ground been my competitor, but the harsh, demanding Creator of heaven and earth has been my Opponent. He was always on the shepherd's side and I am the one who is rejected by the Lord.

It isn't fair! Not only have I not lived up to the standards of Yahweh, but I have always been a tremendous disappointment to my mother. Her words at my birth indicated that she thought that I was to be both Yahweh Himself and man. She and my father had been given the promise of a Savior Who would deliver them from this world. I would not trust in a promise like that -- it is just words. I will do what I can to be my own savior. I do not want to know of this Savior Who is to be divine and human.

Even though my parents and my useless brother trust in that promise given to them by the Lord, I refuse. If I am going to be saved, then I'm going to have to do it all by myself. The Lord God doesn't love me and doesn't care for me at all. He rejects what I attempt to do and I have come to hate Him. I hate Him not only because He is not pleased with what I attempt to do, but also because He has such a high regard for my brother and what he does.

Consider my complaint. Both my brother and I brought an offering to the Lord. My younger brother provided a sacrifice from the firstlings of his flock. Yahweh was well-pleased with, and had great regard for, that offering from Abel. I brought a sacrifice as well. Because I am a tiller of the ground, it came from the earth and it was watered with the sweat from my brow. And despite that, my offering did not please the Lord God for He did not regard it as acceptable.

Now just why was that? Perhaps it is that the Lord God chooses one to show His favor and elects another to be cursed? Is that it? Does He hate the firstborn and love the others? Did I offend Him in the way that I prepared the offering -- or in the way I presented it? Could it be that Yahweh is pleased only with animal sacrifices? Does He not care for farmers? Or is the secret of the mystery in the blood? Does God require blood? After all, I have been told that Yahweh shed innocent blood to cover the naked shame of my parents when they had sinned. Who knows the answer?

My offering to the Lord God was not acceptable. He came to me and said: "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it." Now there is gratitude. Not only was my offering not acceptable, now I am not acceptable. I am simply told to do better -- to try harder -- to master it. Is it any wonder that I am angry and I do not lift my face up to the Lord God? He informs me that I must master sin. It is like a fierce animal waiting to devour me. Yet, I must master it. I have tried -- time and again. Still, I fail -- fail to the point where I am sinning when I bring my offering. My prophet brother brings an offering and it is accepted. I guess that I am a sinner and that he does not sin. That must be it. Oh, how I hate the Lord God for all of this!

What was I supposed to do? I could not please or appease God by my works in order to be saved -- in fact, it only made matters worse. Was it within my capabilities to bruise even the heel of Yahweh? Within my heart I would have liked to have destroyed this One, but I could not get to Him. If I were able to ascend to His abode, I would still not be powerful enough to slay Him.

Still, I have ended up victorious. One deed I was able to accomplish -- it was within my power to slay the one whom He held in favor. Why keep my brother around? With one swing I was able to hurt the Lord God and to rid myself of His righteous son. My invitation to go out to the field was accepted by my younger brother. There I rose up against him and struck him! Now look at him. As his breath is leaving him, his lifeblood is fertilizing the very ground where I grow my crops!

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?"

In searching the Scriptures to find an example of an unbeliever who sought the promise of God's blessing we need travel no more than four chapters. In locating one who attempts to appease the Almighty through works of the Law apart from faith, we need only behold the first one born to Adam and Eve.

Both Cain and Abel wanted to regain the Paradise lost by their parents. As the father of his family and the spiritual head of his household, Adam certainly must have relayed the account of what the Garden was like, what it contained -- of what great joy there was to be holy communion in, with, and under the Lord. He taught his children the fundamental teachings of the Word: the Fall into sin, the Atonement, the Person and the Work of the Savior, and the Resurrection to eternal Paradise. Adam and Eve knew first hand the fall from the state of God's grace that has echoed down through time and traveled across all nations. The first announcement of the Gospel -- of the Seed of the woman Who would crush the head of the Evil One -- had been given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15. These children of our first parents learned of their Savior Whose death would earn the right for all mankind to enter into Paradise again.

To be right with the Lord God in Paradise -- that was what both Cain and Abel wanted. Two different ways to claim eternal life with Yahweh were before them and these two brothers went the separate ways. The difference came neither on account of the type of offerings they brought nor in view of their occupations. There was neither a double predestination involved nor a blessing based upon order of birth.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews informs us why Abel's gift was acceptable to the Lord: By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness

that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks (Heb 11:4). Cain's mutiny from the faith came about because he sought to earn God's righteousness apart from faith. Abel believed the promise of the Seed of the woman as Savior, trusted the Lord to fulfill His promise, and therefore his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. Thus, God declared Abel to be righteous and accepted his fruit of faith as a righteous act.

If Abel still speaks on the positive way of faith, then Cain's life under the Law shouts the futility of seeking the promise without faith. At one time, Cain was a part of the church visible, and yet, he sought to gain the promise apart from faith. Isaiah relays the truth that the Almighty is greatly displeased with and has no regard for those who, like Cain, go through the motions of worship apart from faith. In His criticism of the Pharisees and the scribes as they sought to maintain their traditions and to void the Word of God, Jesus announces the foolishness of attempting to worship the Lord apart from faith: Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt 15:7-9).

Paul writes to the foolish Galatians of all times who move from the way of faith that leads to the promise of life to the way of the law that leads to a dead end: For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse. Salvation through man's attempt to fulfill the Law of God is impossible. Eternal life is only available through faith in Christ Jesus.

The faith that justifies, however, is no mere historical knowledge, but the firm acceptance of God's offer promising forgiveness of sins and justification. Cain knew the historical facts about what the Lord had done and what He had promised to do. His problem was that he did not trust in them, but instead, sought to appease God's wrath with a work of the law -- an offering without faith.

Congregations should always be on guard in this area lest they give the wrong impression to those who desire to earn or to buy their way to paradise or who view church membership as simply paying dues. Consider a portion of a letter written by a woman who, along with her husband, had had their self-exclusion acknowledged by the congregation:

Well you finally convinced the entire congregation to remove the names of those of us that don't contribute to your salary [sic]. Seems like there is a lady that hasn't been to church for years but she sends a check every month so that might be why she gets to keep her name in the church. If that is the case please let me know how much I would have to send you each month so [name of her husband] could keep his name in the church.

To teach and to practice that one must earn or buy God's favor, in full or in part, is nothing less than legalism -- the seeking of salvation through the way of good works rather than the way of grace. The failure of properly distinguishing and practicing Law and Gospel ultimately will yield the man-made system of salvation by works. In its grossest form, it teaches and preaches that Jesus is a new Moses Who has come to be a great Lawgiver. In doing so, Jesus is taught to be the Dispenser of God's wrath instead of the Bearer of it!

But just what is this "faith" that pleases God? How much is needed? What is its nature and quality? Is it the amount of faith which makes a sinner right before God, or is it the focus of the faith? The most important thing about faith is neither its quality nor its quantity but its object. It is saying with Paul, "I know IN WHOM I have believed (2 Timothy 1:12) (emphasis his) Faith is a personal

relationship. It cannot be weighed or measured. When the disciples came to Jesus with the plea, "Lord, increase our faith," he at once directed their attention away from such computation and said, "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you (Luke 17:5- 6)." Faith, the Lord implies, is our connection with God, and its power is not in the connection but in the God with whom we are connected. If we are united with his illimitable resources, then things which to us are impossible become possible. Faith is thus an all-or-none proposition.

Without faith no one is able to please the Lord. In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Christ offers the forgiveness that He earned for the whole world on the cross. Still, in addition to the water and the Word, faith is necessary -- faith which trusts such Word of the Lord. For those little ones who are brought to the blessings given through this washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5), the faith that God requires in Baptism, He gives in Baptism. For others, like the Ethiopian official, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom 10:17). In such cases, baptism is a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had (Rom 4:11) -- a faith which asks, See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized? (Acts 8:36).

The Sacrament of the Altar -- the Lord's Supper -- also requires faith to receive the blessing intended by God. The Body born of Mary and the Blood shed on the cross are given in the Eucharist along with the promise of forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of faith. But the one who does not believe the Words of Christ in the Holy Supper will receive the opposite of the Lord's blessing. For thus Paul writes: Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body (1 Cor 11:27-29). The promise is given and when it is received by faith, there is a blessing. Without faith the communicant is unworthy and the opposite of God's blessing is received. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep (1 Cor 11:30).

Cain was offended at the Promise of the Savior and sought to please Yahweh apart from faith. It could not be done. When confronted by the Lord with the firstborn's sin of murder and having felt the burden of the consequences of sin, Cain admitted: My punishment is greater than I can bear! (Gen 4:13). Of course, Cain was absolutely and totally correct! He realized that he did not and could not meet the righteous and just demands of the Law of God. The Promise was not, and is not, able to be attained by way of the Law. From this generation would the Lord require the blood of all the prophets who had been slain from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple (Luke 11:51). Still, Cain hardened his own heart as he refused to lift up his eyes in faith to the Sacrificed One -- the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8).

Thousands of years later, there would be another who went in the way of Cain (Jude 11). This other man sought to have the Promise apart from faith. He, too, would attempt to make an offering which would take away his guilt and wipe the slate clean with God. Just as it was quite impossible for Cain so it was impossible for Judas Iscariot.

Judas' repentance was apart from faith. When this betrayer of the Lord saw that he was condemned, he sought to buy a clean conscience with 30 pieces of silver. He announced his sorrow of his transgression: I have sinned by betraying innocent blood (Matt 27:4). But repentance is more than being sorry for one's sinfulness and one's sin, it is looking to Christ for the absolution. This Judas did

not do. Having made an offering by throwing the money back into the Temple, he looked only into himself. There he saw no hope, but instead he encountered hypocrisy, murder, guilt, shame, despair, and hell. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies (Matt 15:19) and his conscience would not excuse him. Thus, in the despair of his self-accusations and in the rejection of the one Sacrifice made even for him, Judas left his offering in the Temple, knew that the Lord had no regard for it, and hanged himself, that he might go to his own place (Acts 1:25). But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood." And they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day (Matt 27:6-8).

Both Judas and Cain had fields of blood in their times -- one at the time of his brother's death and one after the time of his own death. Both fields, however, were apart from the field of Blood located under the cross of the Lamb Who was bruised for our iniquities, smitten by God, and upon Whom the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53). Cain sought to please God and receive a blessing from the Lord by bringing an offering to Him without faith. Judas sought to be forgiven of his betrayal of the Son of God apart from faith.

Abel was murdered and out of the ground the voice of his blood cried out to God for vengeance (Gen 4:10). This transgression of God's Law demanded that a payment for sin be made. Jesus, too, was slain and His shed Blood cried out to the Lord as He gave the Spirit: "It is finished!" (John 19:30). This proclamation of the Lord's Gospel announced that the payment for all sin (Judas' and Cain's included) was made once for all (Heb 10:10). The blessings of the Promise given by means of the blood and water (John 19:34) flowed from the pierced side of the crucified Savior. This is He who came by water and blood--Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three who bear witness the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one (1 John 5:6-8). Indeed, it is Jesus' Blood that speaks better things than that of Abel (Heb 12:24) -- Jesus Blood cries out, not for vengeance, but for forgiveness. The proclamation is that everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior has what the Lord promises in the Gospel.

From Hebrews 12 - See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled; that no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled Blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.