



"No matter how far you have gone on a wrong road, turn back."
—Turkish Proverb

15-Aug-08

First Things First (Part One): Access to God

As the [Worldwide Church of God](#) fragmented in the early 1990s, and various smaller organizations were formed to hold fast to the original doctrines, it was common for many of the newly formed churches to continue almost as if nothing had changed. Making a public witness to [the world](#) was still held as the highest priority and deserving of the majority of the church's attention and resources. Little thought seems to have been given as to *why* the church had been scattered. Few considered whether the church was still in step with [God](#) or resembled Him enough to make a faithful witness of Him. Yet, just as a child must be able to crawl before he can walk—let alone run—significant preparatory steps must be made before an individual or an organization can faithfully represent God.

The "[Faith](#) Chapter" of Hebrews 11 shows these steps in the lessons of the first three heroes: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. It is in the example of Noah that we see a faithful witness of God made before the world. However, before Noah appears in Hebrews 11, the author presents the records of Abel and Enoch. What we will see is that the lessons of their examples are sequential. The lesson of Abel's faith must be understood before Enoch's example can be followed. Likewise, Enoch's example must be followed before one can emulate Noah by faithfully witnessing for God. First things must come first.

The story of Abel shows the vital first step. Specifically, it shows how there can be [peace](#) with God and access to Him. [Hebrews 11:4](#) records,

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.

To understand the significance of Abel's sacrifice, notice the events of the first chapters of Genesis. Genesis 1 recounts the creation, particularly the creation of man. Genesis 2 shows mankind in communion with God to the point that they literally walk with Him. Genesis 3 tells the story of the sins of Adam and Eve, and how mankind's relationship with God was suddenly severed because of unbelief—[sin](#). After sin entered the world in Genesis 3, Genesis 4 describes how mankind can be reunited with God. This is shown through the substitutionary sacrifice that God required, which He accepted when Abel offered one in faith.

[Romans 10:17](#) instructs us that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Since Abel offered something by faith, it means he followed the words or instructions that came from God. That Abel's sacrifice was "acceptable" while Cain's was not proves that there was a standard by which God judged these sacrifices. [Hebrews 11:4](#) thus strongly suggests that at some point Abel was instructed about what sort of offering was appropriate. By following those instructions in faith, Abel's offering was accepted, and he was declared righteous.

It is easy for us to pass over the sacrifices of the Old Covenant with hardly a second thought, but we do this to our own detriment. The sacrificial system—at least some part of which was in place in Genesis 4—is rich in instruction and symbolism. It is especially significant in understanding the respective offerings of Cain and Abel. While we do not know all of the areas in which God instructed Adam and his family, it is clear that they at least recognized the need for an animal sacrifice, whether in worshipping God or in symbolizing the future sacrifice of [Jesus Christ](#) that would forgive human sin and restore mankind's relationship with God.

It is evident from the examples prior to the Old Covenant that there was some sort of an understanding of sacrifices, when they were to be made, and what they symbolized. This is similar to the fact that, at the time of Noah, there was already an understanding of clean and unclean animals ([Genesis 7: 2, 8](#)), even though the instructions are not recorded until Leviticus 11. Animal sacrifices in devotion to God would not be something dreamed up by man—and if they *were* of man's devising, God would not have accepted them anymore than He accepts the "traditions of men" offered to Him by sincere but deceived professing Christians today.

We also need to remember why God instituted sacrifices in the first place. They were to remind the people of their sins, and to point to the future work of the Savior and High Priest ([Galatians 3:19](#); [Jeremiah 7:22-24](#)). Abel's sacrifice was a blood sacrifice ("the firstborn of his flock," [Genesis 4:4](#)), and though it could not by itself take away sin ([Hebrews 10:4](#)), what is important is the substitutionary aspect of the sacrifice. Specifically, Abel substituted the life of one of his flock for his own life. Since he did this in faith, he understood that the life of the animal prefigured the life of the Lamb of God who *could* take away sin.

By offering this substitutionary sacrifice, and having it accepted by God, the example of Abel teaches us, as early as Genesis 4, the way back to God for *all* of mankind: through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Mankind was separated from God because of one man's sin ([Romans 5:12](#)), and mankind is reunited with God through one Man's righteousness, obedience, and voluntary self-sacrifice ([Romans 5:18-19](#)).

In Part Two, we will further consider the offerings of Cain and Abel, and look at a painfully obvious application for the church of God today.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

The Awesome Cost of Salvation

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The world's religions are in abject bondage to falsehood because they do not observe the Passover. Freedom comes to God's called out ones incrementally from continuing on the way- the relationship between God and us. It is this relationship which is the most important thing Christ has died for. We need to be sobered at the awesomeness of the cost to set us free from sin- how far Christ was willing to be pushed. Immense have been the preparations for our ransom- involving billions of years (Hebrews 11:3, I Corinthians 10:11) and the death of our Savior. Because we have been purchased, we have an obligation to our Purchaser.

From the Archives: Featured Article

The Offerings of Leviticus (Part One): Introduction

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The Bible is full of symbols and types. The offerings of Leviticus, though they are no longer necessary under the New Covenant, are wonderful for teaching us about Christ in His roles as sacrifice, offerer, and priest. And they even instruct us in our roles before God too!

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