



"It's not enough that we do our best; sometimes we have to do what's required."

—Winston S. Churchill

27-May-11

Cain's Assumption (Part One)

The late newscaster and radio legend, Paul Harvey, was famous for his radio program entitled, "The Rest of the Story" in which he investigated the forgotten or little-known facts behind stories of famous people and events, so that he might give his listeners a more complete perspective and understanding. He was tremendously successful, in large part because people have, in general, an interest in details and the complete story.

We humans are curious, and we like to learn, but at times we are not curious enough! Sometimes we lose interest in the details and fail to make the effort to find out the rest of the story before acting on it. All of us have been on the receiving end of this at some point. For example, a close friend or family member has probably forwarded you an email that has turned out to be an urban legend or a hoax. If so, you have likely thought, "Boy, I wish my aunt would spend just a little bit of time, and check into whether Bill Gates is *really* going to send me a check for \$15,000 if I forward this email to 15 of my friends during the next 20 seconds."

While receiving the occasional urban myth is relatively harmless, there are other times in life when not getting all the facts straight can cause great harm. This may have been the case in the story of Cain in Genesis. The Bible does not explicitly reveal what prompted Cain's actions and reactions, but there is an interesting speculation that is worth considering as to why he acted as he did. The story of Cain's [murder](#) of Abel is found in [Genesis 4:1-8](#):

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Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, "I have acquired a man from the LORD." Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the LORD said to Cain, "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 Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.

What caused Cain to be brutally angry and to look so sad and despondent? Was this merely a temper-tantrum over his offering not being accepted? Was it jealousy because his younger brother found greater favor and acceptance in God's eyes? Why would an incident like this hold such tremendous gravity in Cain's mind? Why was the rejection of his offering so distressing to him—distressing enough that he was willing to commit murder—and then lie to the all-knowing [God](#)? Why did this event turn his world upside-down and cause him to lash out so violently?

Interestingly, where [Genesis 4:3](#) reads "in the process of time it came to pass," the most literal translation is, "it came to pass at the end of days," meaning "at an appointed time." It is possible, then, that this may have been a [Sabbath](#) or holy day offering. Perhaps the "appointed time" was the [Passover](#), making the issue of an acceptable sacrifice all the more important.

The account of Abel's [faith](#) in [Hebrews 11:4](#) adds to the story: "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent [acceptable] 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." [Romans 10:17](#) instructs that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." If Abel offered something *by faith*, it means he followed the words or instructions that came from God. The fact that Abel's sacrifice was "acceptable" while Cain's was not suggests that there was a standard by which these sacrifices were judged. Thus, [Hebrews 11:4](#) means that Abel was instructed on what sort of offering was appropriate, and by following those instructions by faith, his offering was accepted and he was declared righteous.

The fact that God rebuked Cain means that he, too, knew what was required but for some reason chose to ignore it. We do not know exactly why he disobeyed the instructions God had given, but we will speculate on that after we dig a little deeper.

There are a number of possibilities regarding what instructions Cain and Abel had been given that defined what was acceptable and required. First, it is possible that God instructed Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel with the same sacrificial system that He added to the Old Covenant in Moses' day. The Bible records that both Noah and [Abraham](#) made burnt offerings ([Genesis 8:20](#); [22:2](#), 13), a specific class of offering that represents a man's wholehearted devotion to God. In addition, [Jacob](#) made a drink offering on the pillar of stone that he raised up ([Genesis 35:14](#)). From these examples, some sort of understood sacrificial system undoubtedly existed long before the specifics were recorded.

A second possibility is that God did not instruct Adam and his family in exactly the same way as the Israelites, but that He instructed them enough for them to recognize the need for an animal sacrifice, whether in worshipping God or in symbolizing the future sacrifice of [Christ](#) to remit sin. From the examples prior to the Old Covenant, it is evident that they had some sort of an understanding of sacrifices, when they were to be made, and what they symbolized. It is unlikely that men would have conceived the concept of offering animals or grain on their own, and even if they had, it is even more unlikely that God would have accepted any addition to the worship that He specified. Such instruction must have come from God if He would accept it.

We may not know exactly why Abel made the offering that he did, or precisely what Cain knew to do but ignored. Yet, we can generally understand what was happening by remembering why God instituted sacrifices in Moses' time: They were added to the Old Covenant to remind the people of their sins—of falling short of God's glory ([Galatians 3:19](#) ; [Jeremiah 7:22-24](#)). Whatever the exact infraction, something about Cain's sacrifice fell short of bringing to mind his sin and his need for a Savior. Something in his sacrifice failed to point forward to the Son of God's work of redemption.

As we will see next time, his sacrifice may have been the result of an assumption that he made regarding himself.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Faith, Hope, and the Worship of God \(Part 3\)](#)

Faith, Hope, and the Worship of God (Part 3)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh, focusing on the processes of developing faith and hope, indicates that the rules for making the calendar, a very complex activity, are not contained in the Bible. To put ones efforts into such a project (especially with limited or elementary knowledge of astronomy or mathematics) constitutes foolish, misguided zeal. Using errant human assumption, some in the greater church of God have concocted no less than nine conflicting calendars. The preservation of the oracles (including the keeping of the calendar) has not been entrusted to the church but to the tribe of Judah (Romans 3:2). Some of the anti-Jewish bias in the would-be calendar makers smacks of anti-Semitism. We need to have faith in God's ability to preserve a working calendar, believing Him unconditionally as Abraham did.

From the Archives: Featured Article

Why Worship God?

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Many of us believe and attend church services without really answering this most fundamental of questions. John Ritenbaugh gives three reasons for worshipping our great and almighty God.

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