

# God—Pleasing Preachers Part I

a sermon in the series  
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

A sermon delivered Sunday Morning, November 11, 2001  
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.

by S. Michael Durham  
© 2001 Real Truth Matters

## Hebrews 11:4-7

*By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh. 5 By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. 6 But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. 7 By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.*

A few weeks ago we discovered that faith is the ability to see reality as God sees it. Today we are going to see how such a definition of faith displayed itself in the life of three men whom the Bible describes in one way or another as preachers. Abel, Enoch, and Noah were all preachers of righteousness. And all three have the testimony that they pleased God.

The concept of pleasing someone suggests acceptance. When you please someone either with your person or your performance we are saying they accept you or they accept your actions. You cannot discuss pleasure without talking about acceptance. However, you can discuss acceptance without meaning pleasure. The Bible says in Ephesians chapter one and verse six that we are “accepted in the Beloved.” The Beloved is Christ Jesus our Lord. In Christ there is a cessation of our conflict with Him and reconciliation with God. I will forever be accepted in Christ, but I may not always be pleasing to my Heavenly Father. When my children disobey, I will not throw them aside and no longer accept them, but neither will I be pleased with their conduct. I love my children with all of my heart and I want them to know that even when they disobey me I still will love them and accept them, but Daddy is not going to be pleased. So pleasure means acceptance, but acceptance may not mean pleasure.

The ambition of my life since my conversion has been to have God’s affirmation of pleasure. It is my heart to hear Him say to me, “Well done thou good and faithful servant.” Oh, I cannot tell you what those words mean to me, and therefore, I run. But there have been times when I have been confused about His pleasure in me. I used to think that His pleasure was connected with my results in ministry. The more results, the more God is pleased with me; the fewer results, the less God is pleased with me. But praise be to His glorious name, such is not true! His pleasure in

me has nothing to do with results because He is the one who grants or does not grant results or success. One plants and one waters, but it is God that gives the increase.

I have also been confused at times about the acceptance of others and have concentrated more often on the approval of others than on the pleasure of God. But once again I must sound the voice of praise for He has shown me that I don't need the acceptance of others for I have the acceptance of my Heavenly Father. Neither you nor I should labor for men's approval, but we must labor for God's approval. Oh, how wonderful it is to be set free from the praise of men and have a heart for the approbation of God.

There seems to be one commodity that pleases the heart of God more than any other and that is faith in Him. "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Let's see why this is and how faith can gain the approval and pleasure of our God in us.

## **FAITH PRODUCES A PROPER THEOLOGY**

First, let us look at Abel's life and discover that faith produces a proper theology. Abel had right doctrine on the substitutional sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He believed it and he obeyed it. This is verse four.

*By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh (Hebrews 11:4).*

Now let me make a statement that may surprise you. When I get to heaven I am going to discover that my theology was not right or perfect in every area. I would like to be able to say that everything that I believe is perfect, having every "i" dotted and every "t" crossed. But heaven will reveal that is not true. There is no way one man can know all truth. I look at men like John Wesley, Billy Graham, and some of these fellows today, and I wonder how in the world could God bring blessing to their ministry when they don't have it all right? Meaning they don't believe like I do. Yet, God shows me that none of us are used because of our knowledge; it is because of His grace. But, brother, there is one area you better have it right in. There is no tweaking, there is no room for error, and there is no tolerance. You had better know the truth about Jesus' sacrificial atoning and substitutionary death. You better have that right if you are to be pleasing to God and to hear the words, "Well done thou good and faithful servant." Verse four says that Abel had it right. "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." Now we are going to show you why he had it right when it comes to the Savior. But first we have to look at the superiority of Abel's sacrifice.

## **The Superiority of Abel's Sacrifice**

Our writer says that Abel offered a better sacrifice than his brother Cain. Let's look back in the sacred record of Genesis chapter four and read Moses' account of this wondrous story at the beginning of human history and discover why Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's.

*And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him (Genesis 4:3-7).*

Notice that God said to Cain that if he would get sacrifices right like his brother Abel and understand why He had instituted animal sacrifices, God would accept Cain like his brother. God made a promise to Cain. But Cain did not have the heart that Abel had. So verse eight tells us that "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 slew him." Cain committed the first homicide of human history.

In this passage we see that Abel was testifying to God's righteousness in bringing animal sacrifice. We see in the sacrifice of Abel certain things about Abel's understanding of God. First, Abel's bringing an animal sacrifice showed he understood God's judgment of sin and that that judgment of sin is righteous. God is righteous to judge sin. And He is righteous in the way He judges it. Abel realized that. You see his mom and dad had been perfect, the only perfect people on the face of the earth. They had known the fellowship of God. Can you imagine the joy that Adam must have experienced in the cool of the evening when God made His usual visit, His appointed visit? God and Adam would sit down and converse with one another. What joy, what fellowship! That was lost when Adam rebelled against his Creator. When he sinned, death came upon all men. Adam and Eve were driven from the garden. If there was any sense in Abel that such judgment had been too harsh or not fair, I do not think he would have offered a sacrifice in the right spirit. But by Abel bringing the animal sacrifice to God, he acknowledges that God is righteous. He acknowledged that God was right in what He did with his mom and dad, and that He is right in what He would do with mankind. Abel was testifying to God's righteousness.

Understand, dear friend, if you are not a Christian today, that God does not always seem fair or righteous to you. For example, every human being gets what he deserves and that is death. Those that do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, as Abel believed, will receive eternal death. This is their just desert. Justice demands this death. God would have been perfectly righteous to allow us to continue in our blindness until we drop right off into Hell. That is righteousness and justice. Do you believe this or does this make God seem unfair to you? The sinner has difficulty understanding God's justice while those who trust in God trust in His righteousness.

Second, Abel was testifying that he was a sinner deserving of death. You don't bring an animal sacrifice to God to cover your sins unless you acknowledge that you are a sinner. The only way that God can save you is by your first acknowledging your sinfulness. Until you are really lost

you don't need a Savior. I am often asked why aren't more people getting saved today. It is really simple. It is because they don't see their need of a Savior. Why do they not see their need of a Savior? Because God, in judgment on this nation, has withdrawn the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. There was a day in this country when people were being saved in large numbers. There was an age of conviction, fifty years ago where you could walk into a church, and if it was a Bible-believing church you could sense the power of God, and sinners would come under conviction just by being around God's people. That day is no longer among us because we have grieved the Holy Spirit.

Men or women who are sinners don't know that they are lost until God shows them, and only God can show a sinner that he is lost. If you are agonizing over your sins this very hour, if there is a fear in your heart about dying and going to Hell without hope, you are a blessed individual. Your agony is the greatest blessing that God could ever give you. This agitation of your heart is the mercy of God communicating to you that you are lost and you need a Savior. Abel knew that, so by bringing the sacrifice he was saying I am a sinner deserving death.

Third, Abel was testifying that God is merciful. God will accept the death of an innocent substitute on the sinner's behalf. By committing the sacrifice Abel was saying, "Oh God, I have sinned, but you are righteous in judging me. I deserve being separated from you. But I also know, Lord, that you are merciful and that you will accept this substitute (an innocent substitute) on behalf of a sinner. So I come and I bring the firstlings of my flock to be my substitute that I might have your mercy."

Oh blessed is the Lord that He is merciful and that He will accept an innocent substitute on the behalf of the sinner!

Fourth, Abel was demonstrating his knowledge of a soon-coming redeemer. When Abel committed the sacrifice, he was not just testifying that God was righteous, and that he was a sinner, and God is merciful, he was also testifying to a promise that God had made to the human race. The "seed of the woman" would one day bruise the head of the serpent and the serpent would crush his heel (Genesis 3:15). The promised Messiah would come and He would be the innocent substitute for sinners who believed. Abel believed that.

Now you may ask me how do I come to such a conclusion? Well, I ask you, where did Abel get the idea of sacrifice? Where did he get the concept of bringing an animal and killing the animal and offering it to God? He got it from his dad and mother. They had taught him this. Where did Adam and Eve get this idea? The painful day when man was separated and alienated from God, God came and said, "Adam, where art thou?" And Adam said, "Lord I was naked and I was ashamed so I hid myself from you." "Who told you that you were naked?" God asked him. Adam confessed his sin. He and Eve had made clothing out of fig leaves to cover their newly discovered nakedness. In response to this, God took an animal and He slew it, and from the animal's skin made garments for the first couple. In this act of mercy the Lord taught Adam and Eve the redemptive principle of the innocent dying on behalf of the guilty. Adam and Eve practiced this sacrificial ritual on their

own family altar and they taught this to both of their boys. Abel believed it, but Cain did not. So out of faith Abel offered his animal sacrifice believing God for a substitute.

Not only did Abel testify, but Cain was also testifying. Cain, by rejecting the way which God had established, brought the produce of his own hands, testifying that he, himself, was righteous. Dear friend, when you and I bring to God our goodness, it is the sin of Cain. It is to offer the fruit of our hands as being acceptable to God. It is saying, “Lord, here is what I have done, here is what I have produced, here is what I have grown, I want to offer it to you as a testimony that I have something to give you.” Such is a demonstration that you believe you are righteous.

It was because Cain thought he was righteous and didn’t need a substitute that God rejected Cain. The truth is that God has been rejecting Cains throughout human history. Men and women throughout time have been offering to God the works of their hands and have been saying, “Oh God, this is the reason you should accept me. When I die I should go to heaven, because I do good things, I am a good person. Why, I am better than ‘so and so’ and I am better than this one, therefore Lord, it only seems fair to me that I be blessed and that you bless me.” Dear friend, our text says that God testified concerning Abel’s gift. In other words, God accepted Abel’s gift in such a way that Cain could recognize that God accepted Abel but rejected him. We see this in the Genesis account. Look again at the last part of verse four. “And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering” (Genesis 4:4). But unto Cain and his offering God had not respect. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. What does it mean “the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering”? It means that God approved of Abel and his sacrifice.

We don’t know how God showed his pleasure of Abel and displeasure of Cain. I personally believe that God ignited that offering on that altar that day with fire from heaven. Those of you who are wonderful people listen to me, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). That is God’s way, and when you try to do what Cain did, offer your own works, you will be rejected as Cain. Any other way other than God’s way will be rejected by God. You and I must come to God by the only Sacrifice He will accept—Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God.

### **The Sacrifice Does Not Outrank the Heart of the One Offering the Sacrifice**

When you compare Cain and Abel’s sacrifices you discover that the sacrifice doesn’t outrank the heart of the one offering the sacrifice. Now what does that mean? It means it is not the animal sacrifice of Abel that merited God’s favor, it was something else. Something else was more important than an animal being slain that day. What was it? I am telling you it was the heart of Abel. Animal sacrifices do not merit the pleasure of God. This the Bible tells us. Hebrews chapter ten and verses four and six.

*For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins (Hebrews 10:4).*

*In burnt offerings and [sacrifices] for sin thou hast had no pleasure (Hebrews 10:6).*



The Bible is very clear here. What Abel did that day could not forgive him of sin for it says “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.” Abel’s sacrifice, even though acceptable to God, did not remove his sin. Verse six of Hebrews chapter ten says that God has no pleasure in such sacrifices. In Psalm chapter fifty-one and verse sixteen David is repenting after Nathan’s exposure of his sin. “For thou desirest not sacrifices; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offerings.” What does David say are the sacrifices of God? “The sacrifices of God [are] a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psalms 51:17). Israel performed animal sacrifices over and over throughout the years and the Lord through the prophet Isaiah said stop it. “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats” (Isaiah 1:11). Animal sacrifices did not gain God’s pleasure, so it was not just because the sacrifice of Abel was an animal that made it acceptable. That is only part of it.

So the difference between Abel and Cain’s sacrifice is more than the type of sacrifice it was. What pleased the Lord and made Abel’s offering acceptable was Abel’s heart. A sacrifice could only be acceptable to God once the person’s heart was right with God. Abel’s heart was right with God because our text said in verse four that his heart was motivated by faith. Notice the word “by” which speaks of agency. “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.” The motivation for the sacrifice was faith. Faith produced this work of righteousness in Abel’s heart. It was the work of grace in Abel’s heart that produced a faith in what God had said through the teaching of his mother and dad.

But if you believe that Abel was just a good boy who was more obedient than his brother Cain, you are missing the point of the writer of Hebrews. Faith is not something we manufacture or produce. Return to Hebrews chapter eleven and verse one. The author gives us the definition of faith, and we shall see why Abel was the way he was. In Hebrews eleven, verse one, the Bible says “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” This means that faith is nothing more than the ability to see reality as God sees it; to be able to see things as God sees them. None of us have the ability to look and predict the future, nor can we go look back to the cross and understand the death of Christ because we lack spiritual understanding. However, when God imparts that understanding by the Spirit, faith is produced. How does God do that? By speaking directly to your heart and testifying about the truth of Christ. A witness is placed in your heart. It is a personal testimony from the Father in your heart. That is how salvation occurs. The Apostle Paul teaches in Romans chapter ten and verse seventeen says, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

Many in evangelical Christianity believe this verse in Romans is referring to the Bible. But I cannot concur with this interpretation. I believe that the Bible is the word of God with all of my heart. I do not believe that the Word of God needs an additional witness from the Holy Spirit to be the Word of God. This has been the teaching of Neo-orthodoxy. But let us not move to an opposite extreme and say that God speaks only by the Bible. There is the personal and, yes, subjective, guidance of the Holy Spirit, who will never lead us contrary to the words of the Bible. The word

of God doesn't need anything to be real and legitimate. But you and I are so corrupt in the way we think and understand that it takes the Holy Spirit of God to take the Word of God and plant it in our hearts and give us that understanding that our hearts will accept and believe. That is what Romans 10:17 is meaning. Paul had just finished quoting Isaiah in verse sixteen, "But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report?" Isaiah preached the word of God and his generation would not believe him. Therefore, just hearing a preacher preach the word is not what produces faith. It is when God speaks personally to your heart that faith is produced. If faith is the ability to see reality as God sees it, then surely God has to speak to our hearts and show us something about reality that we don't know and could never know without Him showing it to us. It is the voice of God that produces the ability to believe.

This puts a death-knell to the idea of modern decisional regeneration that teaches that by a man's own powers of logic he can choose to give his life to Christ and be saved. No man has by his logical mind deduced that the gospel had to be the truth and therefore accepted it because it was logical and rational. The gospel of Christ is logical but it is not by logic alone that regeneration occurs. God must speak to the human heart in order for faith to germinate. Do you understand me to say that a man or a woman can't believe and be saved? No, you should not so understand me for the Bible says that if a sinner will believe he will be saved. But I am to be understood that a sinner cannot believe until God speaks faith to the sinner's heart. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit and His alone.

Perhaps you say, "Well, I don't know if God has ever spoken to me before." If you love Jesus with all of your heart, then rest assured He did. If you trust in Jesus' substitutionary sacrificial death, He spoke to you. But, dear friend, be careful, there is a belief that is of the mind, and there is a belief of the heart. We are talking about the belief of the heart. "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Romans 10:10). Is the mind not involved? No, it is absolutely involved. But something else is involved along with it, the spirit of a man and the Spirit of God. This hearing is an inward not outward hearing. Jesus spoke to a generation that He said had ears but they did not hear. Meaning they heard His preaching with the outward hearing, but they did not hear with inward hearing. Inward hearing is hearing God's word in your heart and believing it.

Every one of us that is saved is so because God was merciful to speak to us and reveal Himself and His dear Son to us. Let me just illustrate with my own life. I was a preacher and had preached that Jesus died on behalf of sinners since I was fifteen years of age. But at age twenty-six I was lost, I knew that I was lost, and I had come to the point I did not even believe that God could or would save me. While I was praying on the first day of December, God spoke to me as clearly as you are hearing my voice. I heard Him speak, not with outward ears, but with the inward ears of the heart. I heard him say "I sent my Son to the cross to take the penalty of your sins." And, friends, it was just as clear as my voice. At that moment I believed. You need to believe in Christ; thus, you need God's grace so that you might believe.

Therefore, in the case of Abel, God had done a special work in him that went beyond the offering of an animal, and Abel believed in the promise of the future substitute.

I have to stop here a moment and worship the Lord, for I too was a descendent of Cain. Cain's heart was my heart also. Yet, God in His mercy, spoke to my heart and gave me spiritual understanding. Up to the age of twenty-six I had been nothing more than a Cain. I was a descendant of Cain, living out the works of my hands, trying to please God by what I did. But it would never change God's heart towards me. It was through the sacrifice of one innocent Lamb of God that God's heart was made known to me and He spoke to me and produced a faith that I could never produce.

### **Faith Conforms Life to the Cross**

Lastly, I want to appeal to our hearts to understand from the life of Abel, a preacher of righteousness, that faith conforms our life to the cross. Faith will take your life and shape it to the cross. That is why I want to make it absolutely clear, you may think you are saved but if your life is not being changed since the initial change of conversion, you have not been converted. Conversion is a change that begins a life of change. And faith will always be changing you and conforming you to the cross. Abel's life by faith was conformed to the cross. All that he did in that sacrifice was say, "I believe in a Savior who is going to die for sinners." He was a preacher of the cross before the cross ever happened. He preached it by his obedience and by his life.

We are to be preachers of the cross ourselves. You and I are to preach the cross of Jesus Christ in our life by the way we live and by the profession of our mouths. Our whole life ought to be conformed and shaped to the cross of Jesus Christ. That is why men like Spurgeon said when they took their text they always made a beeline to the cross, because it is in the cross of Jesus Christ that the wisdom of God is being displayed. The cross is the hope of the world. You never graduate beyond the cross, dear Christian. We think that it is old, elementary, and simple truth. But is far from being these things. No man has explored the depths of the wisdom that is in the cross of Christ. There are galaxies of knowledge about what Jesus did on that day that we will not know until we get to heaven.

Our lives are to be conformed to the cross and we are to be preachers of the cross. We ought to find the reproach of the cross our joy. Today, Abel is still preaching the doctrine of Christ's substitutional and atoning death. Look at the last part of verse four. It says, "being dead yet he speaketh." Scripture has recorded for us Abel's story and so through this story Abel is still preaching to us. And, as Abel, we are to continue to preach after we are gone. How can we preach after we die? I heard a living testimony of this answer last week, at a Bible conference at which I spoke. There were other speakers there and most of them had personally been acquainted with Dr. Percy Ray. I have mentioned him to you before. He was a Southern Baptist home missionary who traveled all through the United States from the thirties through the seventies. Almost every one of the men who spoke alluded to or quoted Brother Ray during the conference. One of those men was a Brother James Locke, a pastor in North Carolina. He is seventy-two years of age and



still going strong. I liked his tenacity. He said he would never retire. I delighted in his homespun wisdom, it was plain and earthy, but it had Heaven in it. He made the comment that it was Percy Ray who really taught him how to pray. And although Brother Ray has been gone now for several years, "being dead, yet he speaketh." Through the men that Ray had impacted during his ministry he still speaks. Percy Ray is a God-pleasing preacher. He is still preaching even though he is gone to glory.

Abel is a God-pleasing preacher in Heaven today. What about you? One day will your children, and your grandchildren, or your co-workers and friends say of you, "being dead yet he speaketh?" Beloved, we who have believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ and have been accepted in Him will never experience God's rejection. But do we please Him? Do we have the testimony that we please God? I don't want to get to Heaven by the skin of my teeth. I don't want to get to Heaven and have God say, "Son, you could have done better. I was there helping you, supplying the strength and equipment. You were just too lazy." I don't want that. I want to please my Father. So the question for my life and yours is do we exercise faith in God? Faith is what pleases Him. The Christian walk is not being in church every day, and praying for hours, laboring for God. That is not it. The Christian life is hearing God speak to you and doing what He says. Just be faithful to what God has said to you.

God is not going to march you or me up beside Percy Ray or Abel, and compare us to them. On that day you will not be compared with me, or I with you, or to Paul, or with anyone else. God will look to you and ask if you did what He told you to do? Faith is hearing God, believing God, and obeying God.

The life and death of Abel tells us that a faith in God's promised Redeemer is the pleasure of God. It is a faith that will suffer the rejection of the world but will gain the pleasure of God. That is what I am running for. Come, let's run together. Let's see how far down the road we can get before He comes back, shall we? And may we have this testimony that we pleased God. Amen.