

In every age, as it succeeds, God is in it, moulding it, and allowing man his choice; but so shutting him in to the moral of eternal principles that at last his choice, whether for good or evil, comes to the harvest. "Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man," or a nation, "soweth, that shall he also reap."

Yet the last thing to say in this connection is this: All history shows—and this is the marvel of it—God is making possible recovery, in spite of pain. There is always a second chance. There are always forces available to humanity, wherein and whereby humanity may turn in repentance, and find recovery and grace, and so be enabled to move forward. It is the very fashioning of the passing ages that they are for evermore moving on toward that final age when that rule and reign shall be acknowledged, and when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

V

THE FAITH OF ABEL

SCRIPTURE LESSON: GENESIS IV. 1-16.

"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he had witness borne to him that he was righteous. God bearing witness in respect of his gifts; and through it he being dead yet speaketh."—HEBREWS XI. 4.

FAITH has already been defined by the writer of this letter as to conduct: "My righteous one shall live by faith." It has been defined also as consciousness, "Faith is the confidence of things hoped for," based upon "conviction of things unseen." Moreover, we have considered what may be described as the creed of faith. "God is," and "He is a rewarder" of such as "diligently seek after him."

In illustrating the victories of faith the writer has declared it to be the origin of the records. Faith received a good report, and had witness borne to it concerning the will of God. Moreover, he has declared that by faith is discovered the ultimate truth concerning human history, the ages.

Turning then to the stream of human history, he selected illustrations of the power of faith. He began with Abel, and ended with Jesus.

The story behind the particular reference to Abel is recorded in Genesis iv, and is very familiar. Our Lord referred to him and to his death, "The blood of right-

eous Abel." This writer names him as a man of faith, and of that faith he tells us two things. First, by faith he offered to God an excellent sacrifice, which was accepted; and secondly, by faith "he being dead yet speaketh." These two things are distinct, yet closely related. Going back to the record of this man Abel, the writer declared that by faith he worshipped; secondly, that through faith "he being dead yet speaketh."

It is interesting that when this writer begins to illustrate faith he commences with a man at worship. There may be some significance in that. He did not mention Adam, and his faith, or Eve. He began with a man at worship and a member of a fallen race. There is no question about our first parents having faith in God, either before they fell from their high estate, or after they had fallen, and God had talked with them. Here, however, is a son of the race, fallen; and he is seen at worship. That in itself is significant. An illustration of faith is given, faith being a principle in worship. Worship is the highest function of human life. Of man God said, "Whom I have created for my glory"; and all through the sacred Writings and though the experience of the Church man reaches the highest possible level of personality and possibility when he worships, not when he is working.

Here a man is seen at worship. Notice first of all the words, "Abel offered unto God." The word "offered" literally means *bore*, bore toward God, carried into God's presence. This indicates at once an attitude of the activity of worship. We may wonder where the place of worship was, for there was no Tabernacle erected, no Temple structure. Here we are back with

primitive humanity. Where was the place of worship? There certainly was one, and these two brothers came to it, and brought their gifts into the presence of God. These are questions we ask, and cannot answer; but we are allowed, reverently, to speculate. I believe the place of worship at the beginning was at the gates of Eden, where cherubim guarded the entrance, man having been by his failure excluded by an act of God. The gates were the gates of exclusion.

This guarding by the cherubim is at least suggestive that it was at these very gates men came to worship. It is interesting to notice that "cherubim" guarded the gates of Eden, not seraphim. There is a difference clearly marked. A study of the words will show that cherubim were associated with Eden, the Tabernacle, the Temple, and the Throne of God. In every case the central idea is that of the Divine Presence, and the cherubim there to guard it. I think, therefore, that these two men, in company probably with Adam and Eve, personally had a place of worship where the glory of the cherubim was shining at the very gates of the garden from which they had been excluded. Outside the garden, yet in worship they were drawing near, coming to the threshold, and so coming into the presence of God.

They are seen coming, and offering their gifts in sacrifice. Let us fasten our attention at once upon the gifts of these men. We are told Abel offered by faith "the firstlings of his flock and the fat thereof." That is the story as stated, which means that he brought to the place of worship offerings that had been slain. Death was there. Death was acknowledged. Not so

with Cain. When he brought gifts they were vegetables, beautiful gifts from the ground, but there was no element of death, no suggestion of blood. Abel brought gifts that had been slain.

Here again we are in the realm of speculation. In these brief records, however, there are many things we are told because they are of value to us. There is no doubt that this first man and woman had received instructions from God to go to a place that God created and provided for them, and that when they had fallen, with infinite justice He talked to the woman, the man, and the serpent; and uttered that great promise that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. When her firstborn came, unquestionably she hoped that promise had been fulfilled, and she said, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord," who shall bruise the serpent's head. Then I think she very soon saw that her firstborn child was not destined to fulfil the great promise of the ideal of God, and in disappointed womanhood she named her second son Abel—Vanity. Her first cry, "I have gotten a man"; secondly, no, it was "Vanity," disappointment! After the forbidden act, when they clothed themselves with fig-leaves because they were naked and ashamed, God made them coverings, "coats of skin." We cannot read that without seeing behind those coats there had been sacrifice, death. I seem therefore to see behind that fact some instruction had been given, some method declared, some way indicated by which they were told to make to the place of the gates from which garden God had excluded them, by reason of the fact that they had excluded Him.

We are distinctly told, both in Genesis and in Hebrews, that God accepted Abel's sacrifice, and He did not accept the sacrifice of Cain. This is an old question, and has often been asked. Why did God accept one and not the other? There is only one answer that can be full and final. The sacrifice that Abel brought was a confession of sin, demanding sacrifice. There is no suggestion of sin in Cain's offering, no demand for sacrifice. When Abel came into the presence of God, bringing a sacrifice, this was the sign and acknowledgment of sin, and the need for some mediation in drawing nigh to God.

He was drawing nigh to God, to use a familiar word, but breaking it up into a word of three syllables, by at-one-ment. That is what atonement means, some method by which there can be atonement made for sin; the coming back of the sinner into the place of acceptance with God. The instruction for bringing a gift that marked a necessity for atonement was faith; faith not in man, but in God; and faith in God in two ways. First in His holiness. There is no reference suggesting any conviction of the holiness of God in what Cain brought; but Abel came with a blood offering, and in doing so he was recognizing the holiness of God. But also faith in the mercy of God. Knowing His holiness, and hoping for His mercy, believing it on the basis of what He had already said to the first woman, Abel drew near, and his offering said: Thou art holy, I am sinning; but Thou art all mercy. Let my gift speak for me, and represent me in Thy presence.

It is not correct to say, whereas there is an element of truth in it, that God refused Cain's gift, and therefore

refused the man; or that God accepted Abel's gift, and therefore accepted the man. The truth must be put in a different way. God accepted the man Abel, and therefore his gift. He refused the man Cain, and therefore his gift. The gift of Cain was a revelation of the man, and the gift of Abel was a revelation of the man. The one was refused because of what he was, as expressed in his gift; one accepted because of what he was in himself and expressed in his gift. That is what the writer meant when he said, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he had witness borne to him that he was righteous." Abel was a sinning man, and yet a man whose attitude to God was a true one, and whose gift proved his sense of the necessity for forgiveness in order that he might approach. That constituted his right to be spoken of as righteous, "God bearing witness in respect of his gifts." So Abel stands forevermore at the head of the long line of worshipping men and women, a revelation of what worship ever ought to be.

I once heard Dr. Hutton say, when speaking of the possibility of our having perfect confidence in God, that we should always walk through life, metaphorically at least, with bowed heads as those who know they are sinners, saved only by grace. Surely that is the very essence of worship. To come stridently, and without reverence into the presence of God, imagining we can worship Him through flowers and fruits, and things aesthetic, all the trivialities that are dying as we touch them, is to insult His holiness. Worship demands the approach based upon sacrifice. The sinner is so accepted. There must be some way of atonement, at-one-

ment; and through the way provided by sacrifice, which is only the beginning.

This rule runs all through the literature of the rites and ceremonies of the priesthood, all going to prove its necessity. We may as well take our courage in both hands and say at once, This is the meaning of the Cross. We cannot worship, and we can never come to God to worship, save by the way of the Cross. But by the way of the Cross a great provision was made, atonement was made; and sin can be dealt with, and put away by a righteous God; and we may lift our faces and look into His face and call Him "Our Father." That is worship, and nothing else suffices, however aesthetically beautiful it may be, until we come with solemnity to Him as men and women whose only hope is the Cross of Christ.

Then the story tells us, secondly, that "Through faith, he being dead yet speaketh." That simply means that his offering, as an action of faith never ends, but goes on. A true action of faith always runs on beyond the lifetime of the one who acts in faith. He is still speaking, and the story of the man is eloquent. "He being dead yet speaketh."

What did Abel say? What is Abel saying? There seems to have been a general idea that what the writer meant when he said, "the blood of sprinkling," that is, the blood of Jesus, "speaketh better than that of Abel" was that the blood of Abel cried for vengeance. That is not so, in spite of some of our hymns that we sing. It is not true. Is that the meaning of this? Is that the message that Abel is still uttering, though he is dead? Is it a cry for vengeance? I do not believe it. Read again what God said to Cain about the speech of Abel's

blood. "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground," from the red soil, the earth. What had it to say? The general interpretation is that the voice of the blood cried to God for vengeance. This has never been the nature or the desire of faith. Indeed, he was not asking for vengeance. The Hebrew word there is almost a terrible one. To translate literally: "The voice of thy brother's blood shrieketh, crieth." It is a word that marks agony, pain. Why? Because the earth had swallowed that blood; and now the blood was crying, screaming out of dire agony.

What was this blood? It was the direct result of sin, the result of rebellion against God. When Cain slew his brother, he did it because he was evil. In that act he expressed what sin really is. Finally, the same thing was expressed forever by Jesus on His Cross. The blood of Abel was the result of sin, and it cried to God. The blood sounding in the ears of God was the agonized cry of humanity for some way of atonement and reconciliation; for some way of return to God. In the shedding of his blood there was being voiced in the listening ear of God the shriek, the scream, the agonized calling of humanity.

Here in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews, at verse 24, the writer says, referring to the blood of Abel, that the blood of Jesus speaks better things than that of Abel. The blood of Abel cried aloud from the ground for some method of salvation, for some method of setting right. It was the voice of dire calamity. The blood of Christ does not cry for it, but declares that the cry is answered, that the atonement is made, that the great sacrifice through which humanity may come to the gates

of Eden and meet with the cherubim, and retire into the inner place, is made. The blood of Jesus declared the atonement made. The blood of Abel was the cry of necessity, the cry of need, the anguished cry of humanity excluded from God. The blood of Jesus tells that there is a way for men to rise, a way of entrance into the Holy Place, past all the gatekeepers, certainly of men, and also of angels, and of the cherubim. So an act of faith is perfected in itself.

We come back to the old story, and Abel is speaking still, speaking in blood shed by sin as it cries to God; speaking in the sacrifice with which to approach the holy God. So our worship must be of that nature for evermore, offered because the blood of Christ forever affirms the rent veil, the way of access made open.