

Bible - General Questions

Who Was the First Martyr for the Gospel?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Your first inclination might be to say, 'Stephen in the book of Acts' — but the first martyr for the Gospel lived thousands of years before Stephen. As we examine what the Bible says about this man's martyrdom, we find that justification by faith in Christ alone is a doctrine rooted in the early chapters of Genesis.

His name was Abel, and we read about him in Genesis 4:1-12 —

"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. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?'

"And He said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth.' "

It is clear that both Cain and Abel knew certain things that aren't directly stated in this passage. They both knew what kind of sacrifice would be acceptable to God. Doubtless, both men knew about the Fall of Mankind. This event takes place at most a few decades after Adam and Eve had disobeyed God and plunged the entire human race into sin. Both of their sons knew that their parents had sinned. Both of their sons knew that their parents' sin had brought a curse on the world and had caused their offspring to be sinners.

And, both Cain and Abel no doubt knew from their parents what kind of a sacrifice God Himself had made for Adam and Eve when they first sinned. God Himself had killed animals. God had shed their blood as a covering for Adam and Eve's sin, and God gave the skins of the animals to Cain and Abel's parents as garments to cover their nakedness.

And Cain and Abel both knew that God had promised their parents that at some future day He would send a Redeemer who would deal with the sin problem once and for all (Genesis 3:15).

But given all this knowledge, Cain and Abel responded in two entirely different ways. Abel responded in belief. Cain responded in unbelief. In that sense, these two men represent every human being who has ever lived. There are only two kinds of people in this world — saved and lost. Abel believed God's Word and was saved. Cain rejected God's Word and was lost.

Abel, Our Brother in Christ

The fact that Abel was the first martyr for the Gospel is rooted in the fact that Abel believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior from sin. In other words, Abel is our brother in Christ. How do we know this? We find the answer in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11. The book of Hebrews is the Holy Spirit's New Testament commentary on much of the Old Testament. Hebrews tell us the significance of what was going on in the Old Testament. And in Hebrews 11:4, we have the New Testament commentary on the passage we just read in Genesis chapter 4:

"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."

Abel is one of a long list of Old Testament saints who are mentioned in the great roll call of faith in Hebrews chapter 11, along with Moses, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab, and all the rest. And notice also what we are told in verse 13:

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

Adam and Eve first sinned, and onward all through the Old Testament. It is the promise that God would provide a Messiah who would take away the sins of His people once for all; that God would remove the curse that sin brought upon man and upon this universe; that God would save a people for Himself through Christ; and that God would take them to glory for all eternity. The writer to the Hebrews, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is telling us that Abel believed these promises, along with Enoch, Noah, Moses, Abraham, and all the rest.

The writer tells us that Abel "offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." The sense of the original is that Abel's sacrifice of a lamb from the flock was the fitting sacrifice, the proper sacrifice, as compared to the unfit, improper sacrifice that Cain offered.

Abel offered the proper sacrifice — the one that God had prescribed, the one that pointed to Christ, and not to human merit. And the writer says that Abel's offering "obtained witness that he was righteous." It wasn't the animal sacrifice that made Abel righteous. It was his faith in the coming Redeemer that the sacrifice represented that made him righteous. The sacrifice demonstrated Abel's faith. And furthermore, it demonstrated, as Hebrews 11:4 tells us, "that he *was* righteous."

Justification By Faith Alone — A Genesis Doctrine

The word that is used here for "righteous" is the same word that is translated many other places in the New Testament as "justified." We could just as accurately translate this passage, Abel "obtained witness that he was justified" or "obtained witness that he had been declared righteous." Abel — just like Abraham later on in Genesis 15:6 (cf. Romans 4:1-3) — was justified by faith.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is not something that springs up brand new when you get to the book of Romans. It wasn't something brand new at the time of the Reformation. At the time of the Reformation the doctrine of justification by faith alone wasn't *discovered* (much less invented, as Roman Catholicism claims). It was *recovered*. Justification by faith alone, the heart of the Gospel, is God's truth from the very beginning of the Bible.

Are You Justified Before God?

Are you believing in that "more excellent sacrifice" today? Are you believing on the Lord Jesus Christ alone for your salvation, and not trusting in anything that you can do instead of Christ, or in addition to Christ? The way to Heaven, the way of faith in

Christ, is the way of Abel. The way to Hell, the way of faith in anything or anyone other than Christ, is the way of Cain.

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