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Exhortation

"By faith..."

2. Abel (Heb. 11:4)*

Peter Bullivant

GENESIS 4 introduces us to two sons, born of the same father and mother but entirely different in character, and at opposing ends of the spectrum in spiritual outlook. The one was a man of the earth, earthy; the other sought to be a child of God, acknowledging and honouring His precepts. The first was the first-born of mankind, and his character manifested those qualities that were now endemic in the human heart. He desired to have his own way, to seek his own pleasure, to be untrammelled by external restraint, and to pay but lip-service to the Creator. By contrast, Abel, his younger brother, was a man of faith, taking delight in the things of God, finding joy in contemplation of His promises and obedience to His word.

Although the record is greatly compressed, it reveals enough for us to learn the Divine lessons. It is clear that the requisite manner of approach to God through sacrifice, through an appropriate sin-offering, had been revealed to Adam and his family, for Abel knew the right way and, in observing it, found Divine commendation, whilst his brother, who ignored it, was condemned.

"Those who honour Me I will honour, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed", said the Lord (1 Sam. 2:30). Only one thing is revealed to us about Abel, and that one thing is that he sought to honour God. For this act of righteousness he was commended and found a place in the catalogue of the faithful in Hebrews 11, "who are sanctified by faith" (Acts 26:18). Yet he received but little in the way of earthly reward. We do not read that he was blessed with a wife, or that his name was preserved through progeny; and his service resulted in his being cut off in his prime. But had he known what lay in store for him we may be sure that he would not have altered his course, just as in later years Daniel did not change his mode of life when faced with the edict of those who hated him.

Of Cain we know equally little, but that little tells us that he despised God in his heart, having

no reverence for His commandments; and the rebuke of the angel only hardened his heart. Had he accepted the guidance implicit in the rebuke all would have been well, but he would not demean himself to follow the example of a younger brother. So the rebuke resulted in anger, anger turned into fury, fury into hatred, and hatred led to the murder of his brother.

We are wise not to go beyond what the Scripture tells us, as there is a tendency to do, for example, in the case of Jephthah, when a story is developed for which there is no support in the text. And the words of the Lord to Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door" (Gen. 4:7), are perfectly appropriate as a warning to Cain not to allow his anger to master him and lead him into sin.

However, those words do introduce us to a 'door', and the word correctly translated 'sin' is also the normal Scriptural word for 'sin offering'. Based upon those textual facts, perhaps we may see in this incident not only the acceptable offering made by Abel for himself but also his thoughtful provision for a brother, the provision of the requisite sin offering "at the door" of the meeting place, in the knowledge that, as Cain was not a shepherd, he could not from his own resources provide what was necessary.

Such would reveal in Abel not only his love for God, but also in a most practical way his love for his neighbour, those two fundamental qualities which Jesus in later days would define as encompassing both law and prophets (Mt. 22:37-40). And in the provision by Abel of a sacrifice for himself and for his 'neighbour', may we not see dimly a foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus, who made the perfect offering for himself and for his people? Thus, by his example, Abel powerfully exhorts us to offer to God an "acceptable sacrifice".

*All quotations from the RSV.