

# The bread and wine

## Part 4 – What Abel understood and Cain didn't

In Part 1 we went back in Scripture to Genesis 14, where the giving of bread and wine is first mentioned, to look for clues as to what Jesus was getting at when he gave bread and wine to his disciples in Luke 22. We then went forward in Scripture in Parts 2 and 3 to John 6 to see if Jesus confirmed that picture of the bread and wine in Genesis 14, and to see if he expanded on it too, to bring the picture into even sharper focus for us.

And that's when we came up against something rather odd in **John 6** because many of Jesus' disciples were thoroughly turned off by his statements about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and in **verse 66** they "no longer followed him." These people were actual "disciples" of Jesus too (verse 61), but when faced with a teaching that was hard to grasp they didn't try to make sense of it, nor did they ask Jesus to explain it further. They just grumbled to each other and they left.

When Jesus then asked his own twelve disciples in **verse 67**, "You don't want to leave too, do you?" Peter replied in **verses 68-69**, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter's got a point. Why on earth would he and the others want to leave Jesus when Jesus has just told them they can have eternal life through him? It was puzzling, yes, as to **how it was possible** to cross from death to eternal life by eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood, but Jesus had been performing amazing miracles that surely made **what he was saying** highly credible too. And Peter does not ignore that. He's committing himself to something he doesn't fully understand as yet, but who else is offering eternal life through himself like Jesus is - **and** with the credibility of miracles to back it up too?

And that same question faces us today. Who else can legitimately offer us eternal life **in himself**, other than Jesus? But why does it have to involve eating his flesh and drinking his blood (verse 54)? That's what made John 6 such a "hard teaching" for many of Jesus' disciples, but why did they walk away angry when he'd already offered an explanation a few verses earlier in **John 5:39-40**?

In those verses Jesus said “the Scriptures testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me for life (eternal life, verse 40).” An **explanation** for how eternal life was possible through him, therefore, was dotted all through their Scriptures. Jesus complimented them on their “diligent study of the Scriptures” too (39), so why couldn’t they apply the same diligence to studying the Scriptures to see what he meant in John 6 as well? Like, for instance, the story of **Cain and Abel**, where a blood sacrifice is first mentioned, that could **help** explain what Jesus meant by drinking his blood. Could it help us too, then? Let’s take a look and see...

The story begins in **Genesis 4:3**, when “In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.” Since the offering was “brought to the Lord” it suggests a **specific place** that God had set up for such offerings; and secondly, it was done “in the course of time,” which in Hebrew means “at the end of days,” which suggests a **specific time of year** as well.

We also know from **Hebrews 11:4** - where it says, “Abel offered God a better **sacrifice**” - that the offering was meant to be a “sacrifice” too. The words “offering” and “sacrifice” go hand-in-hand, as we see in Jesus “**offering** himself to God” (9:14) “by the **sacrifice** of himself” (9:26).

And the need for sacrifice is obvious from what happened in Genesis 2 and 3, because humans have brought death on themselves through blatant disobedience to God’s clear command not to eat off the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So by rights humans should be dead and gone already.

In Genesis 4, however, we find humans are still alive and they’re even having children. So God has found a way of enabling humans **to continue living** despite his promise of death for their disobedience. And how God did it was to have Cain and Abel bring a sacrificial offering to him, which ties in perfectly with John 6, because it’s through Jesus being a sacrificial offering that we too can continue living - forever. So here we have **life being made possible through sacrifice** already being introduced by God as early as Genesis 4.

The likely place for the sacrifice, meanwhile, was “on the east side of the Garden of Eden” (3:24), where the cherubim are guarding the entrance to the garden and there’s “a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.” Bringing an offering to that specific spot would remind this second generation of humans what they’d lost out on, and why, but it would also tell them that God hadn’t rejected them.

Later on, the Israelites would also bring their sacrificial offerings to a specific spot - to the tabernacle, which also faced east, and it had images of cherubim on the curtain that prevented entry into the Holy of Holies, just like the cherubim prevented entry to the tree of life in Eden. The Israelites' offerings would then be burned on the Brazen Altar, which was outside the Holy Place but still in the Outer Court of the tabernacle, meaning the Israelites could approach God and be accepted by him, but they could not enter the Holy Place, just as Cain and Abel could approach the Garden of Eden but could not enter it.

So the design of the tabernacle was based on Eden, and it got the same point across too, that by bringing sacrificial offerings as God instructed humans could approach God and be accepted by him.

God also made it obvious what **kind** of sacrificial offering would be suitable too, because he'd clothed Adam and Eve in animal skins. Adam and Eve had tried to cover up their guilt and disobedience with fig leaf clothing of their own making, but God was having none of that. He made them wear the skins of animals. Animals, therefore, had to die and have their lives sacrificed to cover up what Adam and Eve had done.

With that in mind, imagine what Cain and Abel might have been thinking as the day of the offering drew closer. It was a crucial time for both of them, because in their offering they could show God they understood and appreciated **what it cost to give them life**. They would then take their offerings to the prescribed spot outside Eden, where, we can assume, the brilliantly shining cherubim would burn their offerings to a crisp as the sign that God had accepted their offering, and accepted them, so that they could continue living.

In whatever manner the sacrifice was done it was surely dramatic enough for Cain and Abel to take it seriously. And one of the two men did take it seriously. In **Hebrews 11:4** Abel "was commended as a righteous man (meaning he was 'approved of God') when God spoke well of his offerings." And the reason God spoke well of Abel's offerings (in the plural, note, suggesting these offerings were given more than once) was **Abel's faith**. It was "By faith" (verse 4) that "Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain."

But what did Abel have faith in? Well, based on the type of offering he brought it was clearly faith in what **God had set up in sacrifices** to spare humans from the death they deserved, and grant them the gift of continuing life.

And give Abel credit, because what God required sounded pretty weird. How could a sacrifice spare them from death and give them life? And why should an animal have to die for the death they themselves deserved? It didn't make sense. So Abel could have reacted like the disciples in John 6 faced with Jesus' blood giving them eternal life. But instead of throwing up his hands like they did, Abel in **Genesis 4:4** "brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock."

What a show of faith that was, because instead of stomping off in a snit like the disciples in John 6, Abel cut out the choicest parts of his firstborn lambs, which to a shepherd like himself was a major sacrifice because the firstborn lambs were the future of his flock, and the future of the flock was Abel's livelihood. For Abel to offer up several precious firstborn lambs, therefore, was like offering up his own life.

But Abel accepted that the saving of life required the sacrifice of life. That was God's set up and Abel wanted to show he believed in it by bringing a sacrifice that God would approve of and be well pleased by.

And Abel got it right, because God "looked with favour upon Abel and his offering," **Genesis 4:4**. And no wonder God was pleased, because later on it would be Jesus who willingly "offered himself to God" as a sacrifice to save the lives of all humans. Jesus accepted God's set up too, therefore, that to save life required the sacrifice of life. It may not have made sense that the innocent must die for the guilty, just like it made little sense for innocent lambs to die in Genesis 4, but Abel and Jesus both believed in what God had set up and showed their belief in it by willingly and totally going along with it.

And like Abel, Jesus also gave the best sacrifice he could. He gave his all to God no matter what the cost to himself, believing God would look with favour on such a sacrifice, and would grant **eternal** life to humans because of it. On that point, therefore, Abel pictures Jesus perfectly, because Abel gave his all to God too, no matter what the cost to himself and to his livelihood. He yielded totally to what he believed God would be pleased by, and he got the same result too, because God looked with favour on his sacrifice AND he granted an **eternal** blessing on humans through Abel too, as we see in **Hebrews 11:4** which says, "**Abel still speaks**, even though he is dead."

So what Abel did **lives on** through every generation as a wonderful picture of how deeply pleased God is when we trust in what he set up to give us life.

And it sets the scene perfectly for what Jesus meant in John 6 about eating his flesh and drinking his blood too. It simply means that in Jesus' sacrifice we have all we need for life. His flesh and blood **death**, for instance, totally dealt with the death we brought on ourselves by our ignorance of God and our resistance to him. And in Jesus' flesh and blood **life** of self-sacrifice and total obedience to God's wishes, God granted us eternal life too.

In Jesus' sacrifice, therefore, God has provided all that we need to cross from death to eternal life, and our faith in that "commends us (like Abel) as righteous" people, **Hebrews 11:4**. By "righteous" it means God fully approves of us, accepts us, and favours us, because it's our faith in what HE set up to spare us from death and grant us eternal life that pleases him (verse 6), as he so beautifully pictured for us in the story of Abel.

It's such a practical story too, because Abel must have wondered why God insisted on this offering, just as Peter probably wondered why they must eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood. Both men, therefore, could have easily said, "I don't get it" and walked away. But they didn't. Why not? Because they both believed it was GOD they were dealing with, so it didn't matter whether they "got it" or not. This was God speaking, and his words were the "words of eternal life," as Peter said in John 6:68. Everything God said was in some way connected to **how humans who deserved to die could continue to live**. This wasn't some pointless obligation God was putting on them, therefore, it was a way of giving humans life - life that they couldn't create themselves, and life they didn't deserve too. So Peter and Abel went with this one simple fact of life, that if it wasn't for God requiring sacrifice to substitute for human death we humans would not have life of any sort at all - physical or eternal.

And really that's where it all begins for us humans, isn't it? **We are so very fortunate to have life**, thanks to God and his mercy in finding a way for us humans to continue having life when we don't deserve it. The story of Abel then shows us how much God appreciates it when we trust in what he put in place to give us life, and we give the best sacrifice we can to show it.

Which brings us to Cain next, because instead of trusting in what God was telling them to do as "words of life" to enable their precious lives to continue when they didn't deserve it, Cain reacted like the disciples in John 6. All this weird sacrifice stuff didn't make any sense to him either, so Cain - just like the disciples in John 6 - went with his feelings, not facts.

Cain did not consider the fact that he was lucky to have life at all. We see that same blindness in atheists today who dismiss everything about God as nonsense, but don't consider the fact that if God had gone through with his promise of death for human disobedience they wouldn't be alive to dismiss God in the first place, would they? Atheists would scoff at that, of course, because they don't believe God is the source of life, but one day they will die and the life they love so much comes to an end, so who in his right mind would refuse to even look into what Jesus said in John 6 as a means of enabling us humans to **continue living beyond death**?

But clearly there are people who aren't in their right mind, because the opportunity to continue living after death means absolutely nothing to them, and like the disciples in John 6 they simply walk away from it.

It's in Genesis 4, though, that we see why that happens. Cain, for instance, like so many atheists today, decided that God requiring a sacrifice was simply too bizarre, so instead of bringing an offering that properly reflected and appreciated what God required to give him life, Cain brought "some of the fruits of the soil," **Genesis 4:3**, which God "did not look with favour" on (5).

So what was Cain's problem? Well, there's a clue in **Jude 11** that talks of "the way of Cain," which **verse 10** describes as "speaking abusively against whatever they do not understand." When something does not make sense, in other words, "**the way of Cain**" is to resort to emotions and verbal abuse, just like the disciples in John 6 who grumbled and criticized and stomped off in a snit.

There's a clear fork in the road, then, when we're faced with something that doesn't make sense to us. We can either take the route of looking into it, or dismissing it out of hand. And that's our choice, but the dismissive attitude of Cain led to a dire warning in **1 John 3:12** that says, "Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother." That's a frightening statement, that if we decide to go the way of Cain we're opening ourselves up to evil and to murderous thoughts, like Cain wanting to murder his brother.

One has to wonder, then, how many of the disciples who left Jesus in a snit in John 6 were among those yelling for him to be crucified later on. And how many Christians have been persecuted and killed through the ages too, for saying it's only through Jesus' sacrifice that we humans have life at all - both physical and eternal?

It makes the story of Cain and Abel highly relevant, therefore, because that's where this whole idea of life only being possible through sacrifice began, and we also get to see what happened to Cain for rejecting it. Cain became "very angry," **Genesis 4:5**, "and his face was downcast." His emotions took over, in other words, but that's **the way of Cain**. At no point did he question his own behaviour, nor did he ask God for further explanation to help him see where he might be wrong in his thinking. He reacted just like the disciples in John 6 who didn't ask Jesus for further explanation either. They just got mad and left.

Atheists react the same way today too. At the mention of Jesus' sacrifice being the only reason any of us have life at all, atheists mock Christians publicly and seek to destroy their credibility. In other words, they share the same murderous thoughts toward their fellow humans that Cain had toward Abel.

And God lets it happen too. He allowed Cain to kill Abel, just like the Jews killed Christ, and atheists try to destroy Christians today. But **God also creates life from such sacrifices**. From Abel's death, for instance, came his brother Seth, whose descendants "began to call on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 4:26). From Jesus' death came the church, whose message has made billions of people call on the name of the Lord. And when Christians are killed for their faith, God makes sure their sacrifice isn't wasted too. Turning sacrifice into life is God's speciality, and Abel's response to that was to bring the best sacrifice he could.

That was Paul's thinking too in **Romans 12:1** when he wrote, "I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God." That's a brilliant description of "**the way of Abel**," who understood it was only because of God's mercy that he had any sort of life at all, which then made him want to bring the most "holy and pleasing" offering he could to God. And in response to that God then made sure Abel's example lived on through the generations, so it "still speaks" to us today.

But how does Abel speak to us today? Well, in **1 Corinthians 15:58** Paul writes, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that **your labour in the Lord is not in vain**." Again, that's a great description of Abel, who was the first human ever to give himself "fully to the work of the Lord," and look how God responded. God made absolutely sure that Abel's faith and sacrifice weren't "in vain" either, because millions of people just like us would read his story, grasp what it meant, and want to offer the best sacrifice to God we can, believing that God will then make **our** sacrifice "speak" to others too.

That's a staggering thought, that if we go the way of Abel - of "offering our bodies as living sacrifices" to God and "giving ourselves fully to the work of the Lord" in response to God's mercy - God guarantees our lives will have an impact on others. Bring an offering to God that properly reflects and appreciates what it cost to give us life, and God makes sure our sacrifice creates life in others.

And Paul very nicely summarizes all this for us in **Romans 6:13** when he writes, "give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God."

Paul then gets PRACTICAL in **Romans 12** as to **how** our whole body becomes an instrument in God's hands. From the New Living Translation it sounds like this, starting in **verse 9**: "Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all. Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the Lord. Instead, if your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads. Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good"(verses 9-21).

This is our "Abel" offering that for us begins with knowing it took Jesus' sacrifice to give us new life, which makes us want to bring the best offering to God we can, knowing God looks with great favour on it and makes sure it benefits others too. It's all there in the story of Cain and Abel, that the disciples in John 6 could have read too, to help them grasp the hard teaching of Jesus that eternal life was only possible through his sacrifice. If they'd taken the time to study their Scriptures they would have seen how life being possible through sacrifice was already in operation in Genesis 4. And then they would have seen how God would turn their sacrifice into life for others too, giving them something else to celebrate later on when they took the bread and wine - just as we can.