

Who was Abel in the Bible?

Abel was the second son of Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:2). The meaning of his name is uncertain; some believe that Abel means “breath” or “vanity,” and others believe it is a form of the word for “shepherd.” Abel was a righteous man who pleased God.

Abel was a shepherd and is known for bringing God a pleasing sacrifice—from the firstborn of his flock. Cain, Abel’s older brother, was a worker of the ground and did not bring God a pleasing sacrifice. Cain was angry at God’s displeasure and murdered Abel. In a striking picture of the need for justice, God said that Abel’s blood cried out to Him from the ground (Genesis 4:10). As part of God’s punishment on Cain, the ground would no longer yield its strength to him and he would be a wanderer and fugitive (verses 11-12).

When Adam and Eve had another son, they named him Seth—the name sounds like the Hebrew word for “appointed”—because Eve said that God had appointed her another offspring to replace Abel (Genesis 4:25). Seth’s offspring were considered to be the righteous lineage; it was through Seth’s line that Enoch and Noah and eventually all of humanity came. Genesis 4:26 says Seth had a son, Enosh, and it was during those days that “people began to call on the name of the LORD.” Abel had worshiped God rightly, and now Seth’s family did the same.

Jesus identified Abel as the world’s first martyr (Matthew 23:35). Hebrews 11 commends Abel for his faith: “By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead” (verse 4). Abel “speaks” in that he demonstrated true worship of God and his actions remain an example of faith and righteousness.

Abel's blood is also mentioned in Hebrews 12:24, where it is compared to the sprinkled blood of Jesus, another righteous man who was murdered by evildoers. Jesus' blood "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Abel's blood cried out for vengeance against the murderer; Jesus' blood cries out for forgiveness of the murderers (see Luke 23:34).

Abel was righteous, but his death only demonstrated the sinfulness of humanity and highlighted the effects of the Fall. Abel was murdered and Cain punished. Abel's blood cried out for God to make it right. Jesus was righteous—completely so—and His murder led to the possibility of life. Jesus' death highlighted human sinfulness, but He conquered sin and death in His resurrection. The blood of Jesus is crucial to our salvation. His blood speaks a good word—one of atonement and hope.

A blood sacrifice, such as Abel brought to God in Genesis 4, has always been necessary to atone for sin (Hebrews 9:22). The first blood sacrifice is seen in Genesis 3 when God clothes Adam and Eve with skins. We see it again in Abel's worship in Genesis 4. The Mosaic Law formalized a sacrificial system through which God wanted His chosen people to approach Him. The book of Hebrews goes into great detail about Jesus' sacrifice being better than the Old Testament sacrificial system. Jesus offered His sacrifice once and for all. The previous sacrifices were temporary, images of what Jesus would ultimately do. Jesus' blood is a permanent atonement. The blood of Abel's sacrifice was a shadow of it.

The Bible does not give much information about Abel, but we can learn several things from what it does tell us. Abel demonstrated true worship by his faith and through his

actions. We know that we cannot please God apart from faith (Hebrews 11:6). We are called to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Abel was persecuted for his faith; we will be as well (John 15:20; 2 Timothy 3:12). God heard the cry of Abel's blood and responded; God is attentive to our lives and our needs.

In Abel's story we also see that God's plan is not thwarted. Cain was banished, but Adam and Eve were given Seth, through whom Messiah ultimately came. Even as God pronounced a curse upon sin in Genesis 3, He also promised a Savior (Genesis 3:15). Abel was a victim of the reality of human sinfulness, but the promised Savior, Jesus, did come, and His blood speaks a better word.