

The Commendation of Faith

- ² For by it [faith] the people of old received their **commendation**.
- ³ By faith **we** understand that **the universe** was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are **visible**.
- ⁴ By faith **Abel** offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was **commended** as righteous, God **commending** him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he **died**, he still speaks.
- ⁵ By faith **Enoch** was taken up so that he should not see **death**, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was **commended** as having pleased God.
- ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
- ³⁹ And all these, though **commended** through their faith, did not receive what was **promised**,

Hebrews 11:2-6, 39

Where Two Or Three Are Gathered ...

ONE OF MY **PET PEEVES** is when people run to the Bible to make it say something it doesn't say. Sometimes this can be dangerous, like in the hands of cultists. Other times, it may be almost completely harmless. *Almost*. It can be harmless with regard to using one passage that doesn't say what you think it says to teach something else that is biblical. But it is never harmless to handle God's word like this, if for no other reason than it gives people the impression that it doesn't really matter what the word says, just what I think it says. If the Bible says something, then what it actually says it really important and for our instruction and personal benefit.

Let's take the example of one of the most misused passages in the Bible: **Matthew 18:20**, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." I did a search on this and found several contemporary **songs** that came up immediately. The songs are about **the Lord's Supper** where Jesus becomes our peace,¹ praying together as

¹ **Where Two or Three Are Gathered** (Liam Lawton)

Here in the Bread that is broken, Here in the Cup that is poured.

Here in the Word that is spoken. Jesus Christ is Lord.

Here where the poor find their treasure Here where the greatest are least.

Come find a love beyond measure In this heav'nly feast.

Where two or three are gathered, Gathered in my name

I come with words of comfort To ease your hurt and shame.

Christians and Jesus will give you **anything you ask for** (no other context provided),² praying together and a **prodigal son returning home**,³ praying for sinners during **the altar**

Where two or three are gathered I am there as well
Inviting my disciples In perfect love to dwell.
Where two or three are gathered I am there with you
I lead you into freedom My path is safe and true.
Where two or three are gathered There I will remain
To offer new beginnings Where peace and justice reign.

² **Where Two or Three of You**, Graham Kendrick (199).

Where two or three of you Gather in my name I am there
I am there with you And if just two of you Stand in agreement
As you pray Gathered in my name My Father will hear your prayer
Hear your prayer and answer And will give you anything You ask in my name

³ **Two or Three**, David Ashley

God answers the prayers of two or three And Jesus is there with two or three
The glory is the Lord's when two or three are gathered in His name
The prodigal sons will be led back home The faith of the wayward renewed
The children of God will be multiplied By the faithful requests of a few

Let it be you, let it be me, let us be the two or three

So come to the throne, two or three You're never alone, two or three
The glory is the Lord's when two or three are gathered in His name
The light of the world will be magnified The powers of darkness removed
If the prayers of the people are unified There is no telling what we can do

call,⁴ praying together as a church to become more unified.⁵ In his book *Steps to Revival in America*, a handbook on bringing revival back to our land, Pat Robertson takes this verse and the idea of unity, and says that after private prayer has occurred, “a small core of those whose hearts are knit together in their desire for personal holiness and their hunger for a visitation of God” should gather together and prayer and forgiveness to entreat God, because where two

⁴ **WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED** (Bradley C. Neal, 2005)

At a little country church in the middle of nowhere
Stood a young just called preacher anxious to spread the word
He had studied for 3 weeks to deliver his first message
but just as he began a small still voice he heard

Chorus:

Where two or three are gathered I shall be there too
And those who repent down on their knees I will make them brand new.
From that point forward you will never be alone
Where two or three are gathered in their midst I will be at home.

Well he preached for about an hour on scripture he had never read
Speaking with authority about faith and peace and love.
He ended with an alter call and the whole church came and knelt.
And as he prayed with all eight of them he thanked the LORD above.
Standing at the doorway shaking hands as people left.
He was looking for the old man who was the first kneeling to pray.
But no one remembered seeing him. No one heard his loud amens.
Except for a young preacher who let JESUS lead the way.
Where two or three are gathered I shall be there too
And those who repent down on their knees I will make them brand new.
From that point forward you will never be alone
Where two or three are gathered in their midst I will be at home.

⁵ **Where Two Or Three Are Gathered**

Where two or three are gathered in my name, There am I, there am I.
Where two or three are gathered in my name, There am I in their midst evermore.

As a Church we belong to Christ's Body, We're a kingdom of love and charity,
We're a city, a light to the nations, Yes, the people of promise are we!

As a Body we grow strong together When we focus our hearts on others' needs.
When we hold up the banner for justice, When we love not by words but deeds.

or three are gathered...⁶ So this verse becomes a kind of cog in the wheel of **creating a revival**.

As you can hear, the verse is used regularly to simply encourage small groups of Christians, be they in or out of church, to gather together and pray. Nothing wrong with that. That's good theology. Clearly, the verse in Matthew presupposes that more than one Christian is gathering together for prayer. But as **Eric Bargerhuff** has asked in his book *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible*, "The question is this: In the context of Matthew 18, for *what purpose is the church gathering?* Is it for prayer? For worship? For fellowship?" (emphasis mine).⁷ Few bother to ask this question of **context**. I'm not sure why this is. Maybe they just don't care. Maybe they are afraid of what the answer will be, because it means the way they use the verse is not supported by it. Yet, what it teaches is profoundly important, and can help us gain an understanding not only of what this particular passage teaches, but in a remarkable way also of what our passage today in Hebrews is saying.

Two Or Three Witnesses

⁶ Pat Robertson, *Steps to Revival in America* (Virginia Beach, VA: CBN 2012), 18-19. <http://www.cbn.com/noindex/PCC/Steps-To-Revival-In-America.pdf>

⁷ Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible: Surprising Ways God's Word Is Misunderstood* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2012), 46.

This quotable verse in Matthew 18 is preceded just two verses earlier with the same “two or three” language. “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (vs. 16). The context of the passage isn’t a prayer meeting, a revival, an altar call, or the Lord’s Supper. It is gathering together for church discipline, one of the most difficult tasks a church body can do together. For it means that a brother or sister has fallen into such great sin that the congregation has to come together and deal with the unrepentant sinner in excommunication. At times like these, the church needs to know more than ever that Jesus is with them when they decide on a matter like this, that he has both their and the sinner’s goodwill in mind, and that if they will obey him, he will use it for his glory, sometimes in simply carrying out what is necessary, often (later) in restoring the unrepentant person to grace.

This verse is the step just prior to that gathering. It is still a relatively private matter, but one that is in the midst of being made public, after all private means of reconciliation have come to an end. The key question for our purposes today is, who are the “two or three witnesses?” The

language goes back to the OT. “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established” (Deut 19:15). The occasion is an accusation of crime, a “charge.” The setting is a court. The witnesses are there to give the person being accused as much fairness and objectivity as possible. The witnesses are there to ensure that what is being claimed is actually true, and not the slander of a single revengeful person.

When the church gathers together like this, they are forming an ad-hoc law-court (1Co 5:1-6:10). This court is not permanent, like the Spanish Inquisition. It isn't It does not take place merely on earth, nor does it have the same kind of jurisdiction that a law-court on earth would have. For example, the church can't send someone to jail, no matter how serious the crime is they are dealing with. The court they are forming is one that intersects with heaven. When God is in their midst here, it is as **Judge**. This is one of Jesus' chief functions in the NT. He judges, especially in the church. “*There I am with them...*”

The church has real power—as it is in agreement with Christ and with the truth of a matter⁸—to “bind” and “loose.” This is the end language of the meeting. “**Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**” This is the language of the “**keys of the kingdom**” used earlier in **Matthew 16:19**. It deals with eternal destinies, such as when Peter tells Simon the sorcerer “**Your money perish with you**” (**Acts 8:20**), and then commands him to repent lest he be damned forever. Paul says that what this gathering for discipline in the church does is “**deliver someone to Satan**,” so that their soul might be saved. Its purpose is corrective and its ultimate goal is restoration (**1Co 5:5**; **2Co 7:9**), but the consequences of not repenting are dire and eternal.

Back to Deuteronomy, the verse reads this way in the LXX, “**One witness [*martus*] shall not stand to be a witness [*martureo*] against a man as regards any injustice and as regards any offence and according to any sin that he may have sinned; on the mouth of two witnesses and upon the mouth of three witnesses any word shall stand.**” The noun for a witness is *martus*, and it is where we get our word

⁸ **An important point.** The church doesn’t just have the power to excommunicate because it doesn’t like someone or because it wants to use this threat as a form of extortion as Rome (and others) have sometimes used in the past. The whole thing presupposes that order, justice, fairness, and love have been used properly throughout the process such that the decision is the right one and they can be certain that Jesus—through holy Scripture—is in agreement.

“**martyr.**” A martyr is someone who dies for the Faith because he has given a witness of the truthfulness of Christianity. Public and formal charges were brought before a martyr (like Stephen or Polycarp or Ignatius or Justin) and they would then officially state that they were Christians, usually giving some kind of legal defense (*apologetic*) on their own behalf. For their public testimony which was against the law, they were put to death.

The verb “witness” is *martureo*, and is obviously related. These kinds of witnesses were summoned by courts to testify that something was true. “**You can call your first witness,**” we still say to this day. Witnesses could be **people** or **legal documents** (even a song), or even **giants pillars of rubble**. When Jacob and Laban struck a deal, “**They gathered stones and made a heap, and ate there upon the heap; and Laban said to him, This heap witnesses between me and you today**” (**Gen 31:46 LXX**). Moses composed a song at the end of Deuteronomy and it says, “**This song shall stand up to witness against them; for they shall not forget it out of their mouth, or out of the mouth of their seed; for a I know their wickedness, that they are doing here this day**” (**Deut 31:21**). The Ten Commandments are the “**Tablets of the Testimony**” (**Ex 31:18**) or “**Witness.**” The law says, “**If**

anyone kills a man, you shall slay the murderer on the testimony of witnesses, and one witness shall not testify against a soul that he should die” (Num 35:30). These are all legal things. They stand up in courts and give testimony or bear witness.⁹

In many cases, the LORD himself is a witness. Sometimes, he invokes himself. “Because of the iniquity which they wrought in Israel, and *because* they committed adultery with the wives of their fellow-citizens; and spoke a word in my name, which I did not command them *to speak*, and I am witness, says the Lord” (Jer 36:23 LXA). Sometimes he invokes his covenant. “I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you” (Deut 4:26; 8:19; cf. Jer 33:20).¹⁰ Usually, this is against the people. he is invoked. And sometimes, people call down God as their witness (again as we do in a court of law). “And they said to Jeremiah, Let the Lord be between us for a just and faithful witness, if we do not according to every word which the Lord shall send to us” (Jer 49:5 LXA).

⁹ “The original setting of the word-group in the Gk. world is clearly the legal sphere.” L. Coenen and A. A. Trites, “Witness, Testimony,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 1039.

¹⁰ These are also the tablets of the covenant, and covenants are witnesses, legal transactions between two parties. In this way, even the creation (covenant) is said to be a witness often in Scripture, a testimony to God’s faithfulness when man is in rebellion (Ps 89:37);

So we've been talking about discipline, courts, bearing witness, and God coming down to see what it is that men have done. Given exactly what it is that we men have done, how much of this is good news? I would have to say, not a lot. And when we ask the ultimate question, just what kind of witness do we think that songs, covenants, creation, and God himself will give to those of us who are lawbreakers, the news becomes grim indeed. It is at this point that I want us to look at our passage today. It deals with God bearing witness. Is there any possible way that a holy God could look upon men and give them a good report?

Hebrews and The Witnesses

How Much Worse?

The passage is **Hebrews 11:2-6**. But what if we preface this with what has come before it, just like we saw with Matthew? It has just said, “**Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses**” (**Heb 10:28**). Have you ever set aside the law of Moses for any reason, even if it was just for a moment, say to do something like pick up sticks on the Sabbath like the

man in the original context of this verse did?¹¹ What does the law demand for that? Death. That is the law.

But before anything else is introduced, it brings you to the end of yourself. “How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified” (Heb 10:29)? If it was that bad to spurn the law in the OT, how much worse is it to mock Jesus with our sin? This is meant to make you look inward to see where you have fallen short. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Therefore, what hope is there?

Witness and Commendation

It is out of this hopelessness that I’ve tried to develop for us here that our present chapter was introduced. It says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation” (Heb 11:1-2). Commendation. This is our word *martureo*. It is “witness” in the NAS and KJV. The word appears again in **verse 4** and in **verse 5**. Then it appears again in **verse 39**. You don’t repeat

¹¹ Remember our discussion of this passage. Compare Hebrews 10:26-28 with Numbers 15:28-35.

yourself with a word like this unless it is an important point. But what is the point it is making here? It is the opposite of all we have just seen.

Creation as Witness

This introduces us to men of faith and this word is used to summarize them all. It is vital that we understand what it is telling us. **Verse 3** introduces us to the idea of **faith through example**. In this verse, it is **our own faith** and the example is **creation**. “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” As we have seen, creation itself is said in places to be **a witness against** people in the Bible. This is because everyone knows with their mind and in an innate way that this world is no accident. God’s invisible qualities and power are seen by everyone through creation. What may be known about God in this way is plain to them (**Romans 1:20**). Therefore, it testifies on his behalf.

The word “**testify**” is not used in **Hebrews 11:3** however. Perhaps this is because creation itself only testifies *against* people in the Bible, but as we will see, that is clearly

not the idea that is in mind in Hebrews 11. So it wouldn't fit. What is in mind here is also not just brute knowledge about creation and its God, which everyone has. Rather, to keep this witness at bay, something more than brute knowledge of God and creation is needed. What is this? It is a deliberate humbling of one's self in the face of it such that there is an acknowledgement that God made it.

A few years back, one of the most famous atheists of our time moved out of his atheism and into theism. **Antony Flew** had written voluminously against Christianity and deism in general. But in 2001, just a few years before his death, he told **Gary Habermas**, a Christian apologist and friend, that he was converting to deism. The evidence for a God is stronger than ever before, he wrote in his book *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. There was a sense here in which Flew humbled himself and did what Hebrews 11:3 says we do. It was a step of faith supported by the overwhelming weight of the evidence. Many Christians saw this as a great victory, and I suppose in one way it was.

And yet, Dr. Flew **remained hostile to our Faith** his entire life. He said that his God was much like Aristotle with **"the characteristics of power and also intelligence."** But he

would not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. And he believed that the Christian God, like the god of Islam, was a violent despot, a cosmic Saddam Hussein. This is why it is so important to see what Hebrews is actually telling us here. “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God.” This is Jesus. Faith apprehends Jesus as the author of Creation, not just “G-O-D,” whoever he happens to be to you. “In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb 1:2), the book of Hebrews begins. If a person apprehends by faith that the Lord Jesus created the world as the Word of God, then this person will not have creation testify against them. Instead, what comes is that this very Word ends up commending him. This is the remarkable fact of the next few verses.

Cain and Abel and Commendation

Having set the stage with our own faith, it moves on ready to demonstrate this commendation. “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts” (Heb 11:4a). Our

word appears twice here. And both points are terribly important.

The first one is used in a way that is **parallel to justification**. “He was **commended** as **righteous**” “*by faith*.” Justification has to do with our standing before God and the language is almost exactly the same as this. “**Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’**” (Gal 3:11). You can hear how these two things are virtually identical in language.

Curiously, like “witness” or “commended,” **justification is a legal term**. It is a **declaration** from the court of “not guilty.” It is a **legal transfer** of the court of debts and riches. Christ has your debts credited to him and he pays the penalty. You get his righteousness credited to your account and you get eternal life. A **legal union** then takes place where a person becomes “one” with Christ as a husband and wife do when they are legally married.

The Bible says that this comes to a person one way: by faith. It is not by law, for it is evident as you saw earlier when looking at your own life as an example, that the law in and of itself is unable to justify a person who breaks it. Nor is that even its function. It can only justify a person who keeps the law. That is what the witnesses are for. They tell

the court that the person is either guilty of the crime accused, or innocent of it. In the case of Hebrews 11:4, however, it is **God to is the witness for the defendand**, for the sinner. This is a remarkable thing.

How can this be? It is by God's grace alone, friends. No one deserves this commendation, for they are not righteous. They are *commended* as righteous, but in themselves they are not righteous. Faith is what God uses to make this judicial pronouncement. Does this person believe what I've said about my Son? Is this person willing to bow down to my Son as the King? Does this person trust that there is nothing they can do to earn my favor except believe that because of the Son, I am willing and able to justify them and give them life?

Now, over the centuries, justification by faith alone has been attacked, in no small measure, because it seems like it leaves no room for works. If a person is thinking like this, then they may in fact be onto the truth of the matter. That's why over and over in Romans, the Apostle asks the rhetorical question, "**Should we sin so that grace may increase?**" He knows people are thinking that very thing. And that means they are hearing him correctly. There is no room to merit God's favor by your works.

And yet, there is a second mention of this commendation in our verse. “God commended him by accepting his gifts.” Let that sink into your heart. This is the part which, when understood, makes so much difference in the way we are to understand the relationship between works and faith, between being justified and being sanctified. It isn’t that Able’s works commended him to God. It is that God commended him by accepting his works. And this is because of faith.

To understand better what is in mind, we need to go back to [the original story](#). Cain and Abel are the two sons of Adam and Eve mentioned in [Genesis 4:1-10](#). We learn very little background about them in the story, save that Cain is the older brother ([4:1](#)) and was a “[worker of the ground](#)” ([2](#)), while Abel was a [shepherd](#) ([2](#)). We then learn that Cain came to bring an offering to Yahweh. It was an offering of [the fruit of the ground](#) ([3](#)), apparently, because it reflected his occupation. And Abel also brought an offering. His was the firstborn of his flock and fat portions ([4](#)).

Now, in the later law of Moses, both kinds of offerings were commanded, but for different purposes. Grain offerings were mostly for happy occasions—[thank offerings](#), while animal offerings were to provide [atonement](#)

for sin. All we learn about the occasion of the offerings was that the LORD had regard for “Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (4-5). Armed with only this information, and perhaps Hebrews 11:4, many have said that the reason that Cain was not regarded is because he did not have faith. That is certainly true.

Yet, I’ve heard people say that his problem was that he was insincere, as if sincerity and faith were the same thing. They aren’t. Sincerity simply means that you are free from hypocrisy when you do or say something. Faith, however, knows that its own heart is fully of hypocrisy, and therefore trusts in someone else to cleanse it for them. That doesn’t mean, of course, that Christians are just pure hypocrites because they have faith. It just means that those two things are not the same thing.

At any rate, when we keep reading the story, we discover something. First, it says that Cain was angry and his face fell (5). This seems to me to mean that he was actually quite sincere in his offering. In fact, the reason he became angry was because he was sincere but it didn’t seem to matter to God. God asks him why he is so angry (6). But then he adds these very important words, “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching

at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it” (7). The focus of this verse is on “doing well.” Another word for doing well is “obedience.” The point is very clearly that Cain did not obey the LORD. It therefore appears that Abel did.

There are two things about this. The first is why didn't he do well. The answer is clearly because he didn't have faith. But second, he didn't *do well*. I know it sounds obvious, but don't miss it. The opposite, of course, is that Abel did do well. Why did Abel do well? Because he had faith. But also because he did what God asked him to do. Would it have been possible for Cain to do well without faith? Sure, outwardly. But that's just the point. He didn't *want* to do well. Not really. Part of faith is that it wants to please God in what a person does.

When you do not have faith, the long term result is greater and greater sin, because you increasingly desire only to serve yourself. In Cain's case, he ends up murdering his brother. His sincerity in disobedience (not doing well, an irony if ever there was one) turned to anger, and his anger turned to rage, and his rage turned to murder. It was a progression. Jude says seemingly of the first sin, “They walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the

sake of gain” (Jude 1:11). He didn’t gain anything in the murder. He lost something. Yet, the murder becomes even worse. “We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s were righteous” (1Jn 3:12). Sin begets worse and worse sin.

Hebrews 11:4b says something about this murder, but it focuses on Abel rather than Cain, so that faith becomes the antidote to sin. “And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.” Hebrews will make more of this point in the next chapter (12:24), but the short of it is that this gets at a root of Cain’s anger. Cain became increasingly angry at his brother’s faith and righteousness. That is, it nagged more and more at the man that his brother not only believed God, but that he was doing the things that pleased him. This exposed Cain and his hypocrisy and it made him angry. This is precisely why there are Christian martyrs. It is not only their confession, but their way of life that exposes the sin of others, and eventually it brings resentment, anger, and persecution. If we Christians profess faith but have nothing to make us look different than the world, do you really think they will persecute us? These go together like a hand and glove. You can’t have one without the other.

But do you hear what I'm focusing on here? I'm focusing on works, on obedience, on doing right. Look again. God commended Abel **by accepting his gifts**. God didn't accept Abel's disobedient gift because he was sincere. God wouldn't do that. Abel did right. Again, it isn't that Abel's gifts, his doing right, caused God to look upon him with favor. It is because he looked upon Abel with favor through his faith and therefore he accepted his gifts.

What most people do not understand here is that their best acts are **filthy rags** in God's sight. The language Isaiah uses there is of a menstrual cloth, and the idea isn't necessary that the work in and of itself is actually wicked (any more than a woman's period is) though it looks good. Some actually make that mistake too, as if unbelievers are incapable of actually doing good works. That isn't the case. A good work is a good work. Rather, it is that it is unclean and cannot be brought into the temple of God. The person himself is contaminated by sin before any work is even offered. The person has to be purified to make the work holy. What God is after is holiness.

God accepted Abel's gift for **two reasons**. First, it was **the right gift**. The outward act was right. And this was in itself important, because just like the Levitical sacrificial system,

it was through the offering of the sheep that Abel became acceptable in as much as it looked forward to the Lamb of God sacrifice of Christ. In other words, this offering and none other had to be offered in order for them to be cleansed. Second, **he had faith** and God commended him as righteous. He offered what he offered by faith, perhaps faith even in the promise given to Eve of a coming Seed. He would not have offered it without faith. Why should he? Without faith, what would be the point of thinking God even required an offering for sin? Cain clearly didn't think there was a point. Whether he knew this or not, animal offerings pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ, even as we will learn that Abel's own martyrdom death did too, for his blood speaks of a better blood, the blood of Christ.

So what we need to see from this example of Abel is **the order of the thing**. God commended Abel as righteous by faith. He justified him. **“By faith ... he was commended as righteous.”** He offered the right sacrifice because of faith. **“By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice.”** Faith came first. Then the sacrifice. Then he commended him by accepting his gifts. **“God commending *him* by accepting his gifts.”** His works were now acceptable in the temple because he was clean.

The amazing thing about this is that God is not acting as a witness against Abel, but in his defense. Greater Blood of the future is pleading Abel's case. God stands up and says "I accept this man as righteous because of his faith, and to prove it, I will accept his gifts." His works actually become proof that he is commended by God. Do you see how exactly backwards this is from what most people think about works and salvation? Let's turn to Enoch.

Enoch and Commendation

The next verse gives a new example of faith. "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God" (5). We may know as much about the man named Enoch from this verse as we learn about him in the entire OT. What we learn about him there is sparse. We know that he is counted as the seventh from Adam. His father was Jared. His son was Methuselah (the two oldest men in the Bible by the way). Enoch only lived 365 years, then God took him from the earth (Gen 5:24). He never died.

This strange verse became the focus of almost never-ending speculation about Enoch among the ancient Jews. Now, we know from Jude that Enoch did in fact leave writing (or at least oral tradition that was later written down). He says that Enoch prophesied about the Day of the LORD (**Jude 14**). He then quotes from the now infamous book known as 1 Enoch from the last part of its first chapter. That means the book of 1 Enoch contains some of the real teachings of this person.

Now, a lot of people become very uncomfortable with extra-biblical books like 1 Enoch. I'm not completely sure all of the reasons for this. I don't know any of those people who are uncomfortable reading their own favorite Christian authors in their favorite tradition. Among those books are included *several books* attributed to Enoch. In some ways these became the modern equivalent of today's sequel. The first was such a run away bestseller, why not make more. 1 Enoch contains some of this man's words. We know that for a fact. Some of the Fathers accepted it as Scripture (Tertullian for example), and the Ethiopian Christians have it in their canon to this day. Augustine said it was too old to trust all of its words completely, and it is clear that in its present form, there are multiple traditions that have been

put together into a single work. We have no idea if the other books contain his words or not. The point I'm making is that given all of this rich literary background, we could enter into all kinds of background information trying to figure out exactly why Enoch was taken, and I think there is good reason to trust some of those materials and what they say.

Nevertheless, what is interesting is that even though Hebrews certainly had at least some of these books available to him to quote, he really just sticks with the *biblical* tradition of him simply being taken by God. Its focus is on the language of Genesis that he “walked with God.” The verb *halak* can mean many things, but the LXX translates it as “well-pleasing” (*euaresteo*). This is the same word Hebrews uses. The focus is clearly on his obedience.

Now, a contrast is made here between Abel and Enoch. **Abel is put to death.** In his death, he still speaks through his faith. **Enoch was not put to death.** He did not even die at all. He was taken because of his faith. “**By faith Enoch was taken...**” Yet, before he was taken, he was also commended as having pleased God. To put it another way, he was justified before he died. How? By faith.

And yet, pleasing God is walking with God, and walking with God includes obedience. So somehow Enoch's

obedience, his “walking with God,” is included in the commendation. But how? By faith. By faith Enoch is accepted. He pleased God by faith. While Abel has the “works” of the right sacrifice mentioned, Enoch has no works mentioned. It is his faith alone that seems to please God here. But whatever the fruit of his faith was in his life (whatever “walking with God” entailed), they become the witness to the world that God did in fact commend him.

Do you see this order? Faith first. Works *necessarily* follow. The *man* is commended. God is a witness for him in court. His *works become the evidence* that he has been commended. Works demonstrate faith. This is exactly what James is talking about when he says we are not justified “by faith alone.” He isn’t speaking about being justified apart from merit, like Paul is. He is talking about good works necessarily accompanying your faith. If you have no works, your faith is dead. The works are part of the commendation, but they do not make God commend you.

Everyone Else

As you move through Hebrews 11, you are continuously bombarded with the works and faith of every

person named or unnamed. We will focus more on these works in coming weeks. For today, our focus is on the word “**commended**.” After Enoch, the word retreats into the background until **vs. 39**. Then it says, “**And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.**” Like Abel, their works become the evidence of their commendation. But their commendation itself is by faith. By faith alone.

Without Faith it is Impossible to Please God

This summary verse of the whole list of people in his chapter clearly has God witnessing for the people as something that isn't true for just Abel and Enoch. All the saints are commended by God. Their obedience is a demonstration of that. But it is faith alone that really sets us up to understand this.

The summary verse for creation, Abel, and Enoch is found in **vs. 6**. “**And without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.**” Earlier, we saw that the whole idea of witnesses is **judicial**. But in the case of sinners, having the law as your witness, or

a covenant as your witness, or heaven as your witness, or even God as your witness is a very dangerous proposition.

Beloved, if you try to approach God on your own merits or the merits of anyone other than Jesus Christ, you are doomed. You can't do it. No matter what you do, you will not be able to please him. Only by faith is a person able to please God. By faith alone.

Of all the writers in the NT, the Apostle John likes our word "witness" or "commend" the most. Jesus is regularly said to have a witness in heaven or his works are a witness for him. These prove legally that he is who he says that he is. But he then sends a witness who will indwell believers and his name is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit becomes our witness that the things said about Christ are true, and he then bears witness in heaven that our faith is real.

This faith has three things in this verse. First, it **desires to draw near to God**. Those without faith have no desire to even come to God, not really. The thought either bores them, disgusts them, angers them, or frightens them. Perhaps you see yourself in one of those descriptions even just now.

But let's say there is some kind of a desire to draw near to God. I mean, even unbelievers are religious, and many of

them do go to worship the true God. How are they to approach him? First, they have to **believe that he exists**. Some come into worship and don't believe even this, maybe because their parents bring them or they come because they want their kids to become "moral." But they don't really even believe he exists. It is a prerequisite to believe that God exists.

But second, you believe that **he rewards those who seek him**. Seek him how? **Through his Word**. Christ is the way we draw near to God and are accepted. This has been the sustained argument of the entire book. We don't just seek God whoever we like. We seek him through his Son.

Rewards them in what way? **With eternal life**, which is prefigured in Enoch. God gives life to those who seek him. **Sometimes, with death**. You say, that isn't much of a reward. But the reward of death is that we live again. And the deaths of the martyrs also speak to this day to thousands of people, inviting them to trust in Christ who died for them. God uses our deaths, especially those kinds of deaths, not just for us but for others. For us, they conform us into the image of the Son and transfer us into Glory. For others, they wonder what kind of thing would cause someone to die like this? And they turn to the Son. It has happened

throughout history and the more people are martyred, the more God uses it to save people.

Faith is not just looking to see what God will do for me now. It is looking beyond now to tomorrow, through pain and suffering to the time when there are no more tears or sin. This is the reward he speaks of here. It is the reward of faith, when Jesus himself—who is the Judge—defends your case before the Council of heaven. Yes, it is possible for God to be a witness for you rather than against you. Thank God. What amazing grace! That only happens through faith in the Son, by which God is pleased.