

The meaning of Life: Did Abel live up to his name?

Aaron Dunlop

Genesis four begins with the birth of two sons to Adam and Eve. They named their first son Cain, acknowledging that he was "from the Lord." They may have believed, as some scholars think, that he was the Messiah whom God had promised back in the garden (Genesis 3:15). At the very least, the name Cain and the explanation given for his name (4:1) shows that our first parents had faith in the promised Saviour.

The second son was named Abel. There is no explanation for why they named him Abel. Could this name indicate their

disappointment in life and the emptiness of a fallen world? The Hebrew word *hebel* means “breath” or “vapor.” It speaks of that which is fleeting or temporary, or that which is empty. In a word, the name Abel means vanity. A very different atmosphere to the joyful hope bound up in their first son, and ironically neither of these sons would live up to their names.

The Hebrew word *hebel* (or Abel) is used here as a proper name. It appears here eight times (Genesis 4:1-10), and nowhere else in the Old Testament as a proper name. However, this word *hebel* is used throughout the Old Testament in three ways (TWOT, 1:205). **First**, to describe the false gods, or idols—they are vanity (e.g. Deuteronomy 32:21). **Second**, of individuals who waste their lives or the frustration of individuals who feel they have lived their life in vain (Psalm 39:5-6; Isaiah 49:4; Job 7:16). **Third**, the cluster of references in Ecclesiastes (36 times) where the continual repetition of this word acts like a drumbeat to set the theme of the book.

This brings us back to Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve. If we view Abel's life merely from the perspective of life "under the sun," it illustrates all of what the Preacher explains in Ecclesiastes. His physical life was fleeting and empty—without descendants or legacy—his death was senseless, and his faithfulness and devotion to God appears to have been pointless.

However, we can look at Abel's life through another lens and frame the text in a broader perspective—a divine perspective. In his name, "Abel," we expect to find a shallow, fruitless and unfulfilled life, but the opposite is the case. From the divine perspective we learn **first that the meaning of life is not measured by the length of life, but by faith in God.** Abel's was a short life, but his faithfulness to God proved sure and it has echoed through history. His name is among those we refer to as the "heroes of the faith" (Hebrews 11:4).

Second, that a person's value is not diminished by the injustices inflicted on him but is proof of a valued life. The world is not worthy of such individuals (Hebrews 11:38), but they are inestimably valued by God, and their suffering is a mark of a worthy life (2 Timothy 3:12; Philippians 1:29).

We learn **thirdly that a fulfilled life is not found in our acceptance with others, but in our acceptance with God.** Notice in Genesis 4, that the focus is on the person rather than the offering; "Abel and his offering" (vs. 4). Abel believed God and his offering was accepted because Abel was accepted (Hebrews 11:4).

Cain, who at first held so much promise, lived a hollow life and died a wandering fugitive. He was rootless, without a community and separated from God. Abel, on the other hand, who seems to have been a harbinger of emptiness for his parents, did not live up to his name. Parents sometimes get it wrong! Abel, not Cain, was the son with promise, the godly seed, living, although a short life, a full

and fruitful one. In his death he gave testimony to his faith in the living God, his acceptance with God and his eternal home.