

## The Puzzle

*Through faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command,  
so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.  
By faith Abel brought 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.  
By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death:  
"He could not be found, because God had taken him away."  
For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.*

*Hebrews 11:3-5 (NIV)*

### Missing Pieces

I used to buy puzzles at garage sales when I was little. Five-hundred piece puzzles and two-thousand piece puzzles of jelly beans and flowers and castles and pretty much anything I could find. But the problem with buying puzzles for twenty-five cents at garage sales was that sometimes, there were pieces missing. I always got frustrated when that happened because I couldn't finish the puzzle then, I couldn't see the whole picture. It was incomplete.

Stories are the same way. Sometimes, they're missing a page that the dog ate, or a two-year-old ripped out or crayoned all over. Other times, the story has gaps because it is missing details. Just like the puzzles I used to buy at garage sales, when the story is missing pieces or details, it's hard to get the complete picture.

For the recipients of Hebrews, the stories found in this chapter were familiar. They were passed down in synagogues and on the street and in living rooms. We are further removed from these stories, though we may be familiar with some of them. So for us, Hebrews 11 is a little bit like a puzzle with missing pieces on its own.

To make things even more complicated, some of the stories are missing pieces, too. The stories of Creation, Abel, and Enoch are all incomplete. They are all missing details. Some more than others, but they are incomplete. And yet, they all get a place in the Hall of Faith. Let's take a look at the first three stories found in Hebrews 11 today.

### Creation

When you open the first few pages of your Bible, you find the Creation story. As a kid, you probably heard the Creation story and saw the big color pictures in a Bible story book, or maybe

you saw the story told with the help of movable pictures on a felt board. It's a very familiar story to many of us.

The Creation story has also sparked a lot of controversy – should it be taken as a literal account, or a figurative one? As someone who is getting a doctorate in biochemistry and as a Christian, I can tell you how heated this controversy can get. I could give you the thirty-page document I wrote for a class in college on Creation, evolution and faith. I could give you all of the scientific documents, the biblical commentaries, and the debates that have occurred over the years, but that's actually not the main point of the story. The *how* of creation is important, but the main point of the story is the *who* of Creation. When we look at this puzzle, we are missing details, the middle pieces of the puzzle. But we have the outside edges of the puzzle, enough to see the main point of the story, enough to have faith in the God of creation.

In Hebrews 11:3, the author wrote, “*Through faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command.*” It is only in this part of the puzzle that the author says that *we* understand. He doesn't say, “Through faith our ancestors understood...” . Nor did he say, “Through faith someday you will understand...”. Rather, what he affirms is that we (you and me, here and now) know through faith that God created. It was God who brought all of this wonderful world into being. And we can know this. Perhaps we will argue about how he did it, but we have faith that God stands behind and upholds creation. *We* understand that God commanded the universe into being.

Go back to page 1 of your Bible. I'm going to ask you to read a story that you've probably read a hundred times. But please, read it. Slowly. If you're the type of person who likes to mark in their Bible, get a pen, and as you read, answer these questions:

*Read Genesis 1:1-2:3*

*What is the fourth word in verse 1? I'll even make this one fill in the blank:*

*In the beginning \_\_\_\_\_*

*How many times does this passage use the word good? Very good?*

*Read Hebrews 11:3. What else do we learn about Creation in this verse?*

We may be missing some pieces, some details to the Creation story. But it is by faith that we understand that God did it. We don't know the details of how he did it or how long it took, but He did it. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command.

### Abel

I have two siblings. And you can bet that we fought when we were little. We fought over toys, and over mom and dad's attention, and about who had to clean the big bathroom this week. Inevitably, it always seemed as if someone ended up crying, but we all made up and life went on...eventually. The story of Cain and Abel is the first sibling fight recorded in the Bible. But it had quite a different outcome than the fights of my childhood.

Abel was a son of Adam and Eve, and brother to Cain. Abel was a shepherd, while Cain was a farmer.

*Read Genesis 4:1-4:16*

It's not that God liked sheep better than vegetables as an offering that made him displeased with Cain. It was that Abel brought the fat portions from his firstborn animals, while Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil. God expected the best for offerings, not just the leftovers, and Cain and Abel both knew that. Yet in faith, Abel chose to sacrifice what was right, while Cain did not. To make it even worse, Cain then kills Abel and lies to God about it.

Now, we're missing a lot of details here. We have some of the middle pieces of the puzzle, but not all of them. Why did Cain feel the desire to kill his brother? Did he think that God would like his offering better if he didn't have to compete with his brother's offering, or was he just lashing out in anger? Why didn't he just bring the right offering to begin with? We actually don't know WHY God was pleased with Abel and displeased with Cain. We have to guess, to look at the pieces we have and wonder about the missing ones. In fact, Hebrews gives us more of the puzzle ("he brought a better sacrifice") than Genesis does!

*Read Hebrews 11:4. Which one of the brothers is commended for his faith in this verse?*

The end of verse 4 says that Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. Genesis 4:10 reveals that the blood of Abel, the faithful one, cried out to God. His blood was the marker for violence against a brother. When Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees in Luke 11, he says that, "this

generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary” (verse 50, NIV). And yet there was another’s blood that was shed by human hands that speaks a better word. My study Bible points out an interesting contrast: “Abel’s blood cried out for justice and retribution, whereas the blood of Jesus shed on the cross speaks of forgiveness and reconciliation.”<sup>1</sup>

Violence against human beings at the hands of other human beings is all too common. All you have to do is pick up a newspaper or scroll down your CNN newsfeed or watch the local news at night to see that the blood of Abel still speaks, crying out for justice. And, let’s face it, a lot of times we wonder if anyone hears. Sometimes the Western news media doesn’t even cover the stories of violence in far off places. Often no local government army or police force or UN peacekeeping force steps in. But the blood of the victims still cries out. And even though it doesn’t seem like God hears, He does. By faith we trust that God heard the cries of Abel, and he hears the cries of victims today. By faith we trust that – someday – God will bring an end to violence and suffering and death.

### Enoch

In the first few verses of Hebrews 11, this is the story with the most missing pieces. It seems like we have the corners, and some pieces of the edge, but that’s about it. We only get a measly seven verses on this man, and we don’t really get any of his story in that space.

*Read Genesis 5:18-5:24*

Enoch’s dad was Jared, and his son was Methuselah, in the line of Seth. And he walked with God, and God took him away. That’s it. Enoch is mentioned in two other genealogies (1 Chronicles 1:3 and Luke 3:37). He is mentioned once in the book of Jude as a prophet (Jude 14-15). And he is mentioned here in Hebrews 11. Nowhere else in the Bible does his name appear. All we know is that he walked with God, and that he pleased God. That doesn’t seem like much to go on.

*Read Hebrews 11:5-6*

Enoch must have been a pretty amazing guy. He must have been a hero. Only one other person in Scripture is recorded to have been taken away by God, not allowed to experience death – the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 2).

Even though we don't know much about Enoch's story, we know that he pleased God, "and without faith it is impossible to please God," (Hebrews 11:6). We have to have faith – that's where it all starts. And if we have faith, that pleases God. And if we have faith, that should stir us to action, and that pleases God. Clearly Enoch knew how something about pleasing God. There are a lot of missing pieces to this puzzle, but the pieces that are there frame the importance of having faith. Enoch walked with God. Another puzzle piece... there is a difference between simply living, and walking with God.

We may not have all the pieces of the puzzle. We don't have all the details. But what we do know is that by faith we understand that the universe was formed by God. We know that Abel was faithful, and Enoch was faithful and that we can follow their example.

I often find that I do not have all the puzzle pieces to my life. I don't understand why certain things happen. I don't always understand why I am where I am. Maybe you've been there too. These stories remind us that life is often a puzzle. It isn't always clear. But the pieces of the puzzle that we do have make at least this much clear: faith tells us that God created us, hears us, and wants to walk with us. And in the midst of all the missing puzzle pieces, that's a pretty amazing picture.

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<sup>1</sup> NIV Study Bible (Genesis 4:10; General editor Kenneth Barker)