

Abel

The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. James 3:6

Have you ever been beaten up by a bully? Maybe at school, or in your neighborhood? Has your older brother or sister ever made fun of you? Not much fun, is it? And if you have ever suffered and been mistreated because you were standing up for what's right, you might know how Abel felt being picked on by his big brother. And it didn't end up a pretty picture. We don't know exactly what happened that fateful day, but it's likely Cain began by calling his brother names. "Momma's boy!" or "Chicken!"

"If being right with God makes you want to make fun of me, then I'll take it," Abel might well have replied. And, of course, for Cain it was probably hard not to get angry with someone who always seemed to say the right thing at the right time for the right reason.

You know the rest of the story. Cain killed Abel, and we've been paying the price ever since. Anger leads to fists, and fists bring fights. Fights lead to war, and war ends in murder and death. In American history alone, we've sure had our fair share of wars: the Indian wars, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the war with Mexico, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the first and second wars in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, and most recently the worldwide war on terror. Millions have died, and hundreds of millions have suffered.

But let's go back to how this story began. I mean, what if Cain hadn't gotten angry with Abel? What if he had listened to Abel's advice? What if Cain hadn't lost his temper and killed Abel? Would the antediluvian world have become so wicked that God would have to destroy it with a flood of waters? We'll never know the answers to those questions this side of heaven, but one thing is sure: Control your tongue, or it will control you. Abel could tell you all about that.

JANUARY 2

Abraham

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. Hebrews 11:8

Abraham was quite a guy! Called by God to leave his pagan hometown of Ur, he obeyed, not even knowing where he was headed. When we realize what kind of a city Ur was, we might understand how difficult it must have been to leave. In those days, Ur was a port city of great wealth on the Persian Gulf. It had schools, libraries, and a sophisticated system of laws and courts. Homes were comfortable, many of them with second-story balconies and skylights, plumbing, indoor pools, and lush gardens.

And what did Abraham trade all this for? The life of a nomad camping out 24/7. Now he and his family had to cook over a campfire instead of a courtyard grill. Instead of farming crops in one place, he and his guys had to move around constantly to herd his sheep, goats, and cattle. They had to fight against lions, bears, and Amorite giants. Why? Because God asked him to do it. That's a pretty good reason. But there was an upside to all this too. Ur was the center of a corrupt form of worship in which people worshiped the moon and offered human sacrifices. It was not a good place to raise kids. Then, too, the city was later completely destroyed, another excellent reason for Abraham to get out of town. Answering God's call, Abraham journeyed to Canaan and started a new clan that worshiped the Creator God of heaven and earth, not the things He created.

So, what if Abraham hadn't obeyed God and left Ur? What if he had refused to go camping nonstop? What if he had not obeyed God in everything asked of him? Quite clearly the Jewish nation would have never existed. The promise of a Savior would have had to be fulfilled in some other way. We would not have Abraham's example of what it means to obey God, no matter how hard that might seem.

Adam

“Believe on the LORD Jesus, and you will be saved.” Acts 16:31

How many push-ups can you do? How many push-ups can you do with one hand tied behind your back? What’s your official time in the forty-yard dash? Can you do a 360-degree windmill dunk? Can you do a double rodeo 1080 on a half-pipe?

Adam could do all this and more. He could swim with the fastest of dolphins. He could outclimb mountain goats on the face of a rocky cliff. He could outrun zebras, outsiwng monkeys, and outsmart tigers! And given time, he would have eventually learned how to fly with the eagles. He was at least twelve feet tall, weighed as much as 1,300 pounds, boasted abs that would put today’s best body-builders to shame, and likely had an IQ of eight hundred.

That’s cool. Don’t you sometimes wish you had those advantages? Putting it plainly, Adam was like Superman in more ways than not. Most important, he was made in God’s image, and that means he had the capacity to love like God. He was kind and compassionate like Jesus and willing to share like the Holy Spirit.

But in the end Adam was not smart. Quite simply, he blew it! He was not wise enough to trust in the Creator who gave him life. When Eve came home carrying an armload of fruit from Eden’s forbidden tree, Adam fell for the oldest game in history. He chose Eve and the temptation she offered him to be wise like the gods. What a shame! Obeying the God of the universe from the start would have saved Adam a world of sadness.

What if you could go back to Eden and help Adam make that choice all over again? Would you do it? Today we have a chance to make those same kinds of choices, to get it right this time, to make the decisions Adam did not. Today we can say courageously, “Get behind me, Satan. I choose Jesus and His words of life.”

JANUARY 4

Cain

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Genesis 4:9, NIV

Anyone who has younger brothers or sisters knows how annoying they can be at times. They get into your personal things. They get in the way when your friends are around. They just don’t understand simple language like “No!” Psychologists tell us that sibling rivalry is one of the most powerful emotions on earth. It makes us compete for our parents’ attention. It causes us to fight over possessions and food. It can even cost us a boyfriend or girlfriend.

However, brothers and sisters can be pretty wonderful too. Think about it. The longer you live, the more you will probably appreciate your siblings, especially in the case of sisters. Who sticks with you through the tough times of life? Who shows up for all those important events like baptisms, graduations, weddings, and the first babies that come along? And there’s something else you may not have thought about. Our brothers and sisters will be around for longer than any of our other earthly relationships. Our parents are gone before we are, and our children outlive us by at least a generation. But brothers and sisters? They may spend as much as eighty or ninety years together.

Now, Cain and his brother Abel were destined to spend a lot of time together. According to Genesis most of the antediluvians at that time lived eight or nine hundred years. Wow! That’s a long time if you have a hard time getting along. And that was the problem. Cain and Abel didn’t agree on many things, and their worship of God was one of the biggest differences. To put it simply, Cain was an angry young man. He resented everybody, it seemed, and it all went back to how he felt about God.

But what if he hadn’t let his anger get the best of him? Well, he wouldn’t have murdered his brother, for starters, and he wouldn’t have had to leave his family and home for the rest of his life. Wow! That’s a serious price to pay for a temper tantrum! So, what’s the message here? Don’t let anger and resentment control you. It’s not worth it.



Eliezer

The LORD has heard my supplication; The LORD will receive my prayer. Psalm 6:9

How would you like being sent across the desert on a scavenger hunt to find a wife for your CEO's son? That's what happened to Eliezer. Abraham asked his chief servant, Eliezer, to find a wife for his son, a common custom of that era. People bartered for such things in those days, hoping that the match made by the family would be a happy one. There was no other way to do it, but that didn't make it any easier for Eliezer. This is how the story turned out. Eliezer grabbed ten of Abraham's fastest camels and raced pell-mell across the desert to Haran. When he finally got to his destination, the camels were on empty. How do we know? Because of the water they had to draw for the camels at the watering trough when he arrived.

Eliezer was very worried about his assignment. How was he going to know which girl was the right one to bring home to Isaac? Should he put an ad in Haran's local newspaper? Could he post Isaac's profile on Facebook, Twitter, or a dating Web site? Should he make an announcement on the radio or local TV stations? They didn't have such things in those days, so Eliezer did the only sensible thing. He prayed. Would God show him the right girl to take home for Isaac? He asked that the one who offered to water his camels would be the girl of choice. Really! What an awesome prayer of faith. Eliezer must have truly been in touch with God to make such a request!

And, of course, God heard his cry for help. But what if Eliezer hadn't prayed such a prayer? Well, Isaac would not have married Rebekah, the new bride-to-be. Jacob would not have been born. Joseph would not have been born, and millions would have died in Egypt's coming famine. And the list goes on. That's the difference prayer can make. So what's the catch? God expects us to pray specific prayers, that much is sure. If we are more like Eliezer, maybe we will have more success.

JANUARY 6

Enoch

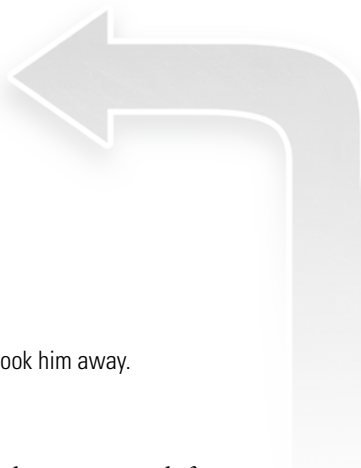
Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.
Genesis 5:24, NIV

Enoch is one of the most famous characters in history, maybe not so much for what he did but for what he didn't do. To put it simply, he never died. Excuse me, someone might say. How does that sort of thing happen in this world? Well, it doesn't. Not very often, anyway. As far as we know, it happened only one other time in world history.

Clearly Enoch was out of place in a world gone crazy with wickedness. He was a man after God's own heart, of unusual character because he was in constant communion with heaven. Inspiration tells us he preached against the world's growing wickedness, pleading with folks to turn back to God. He even predicted the end of the world, first by a flood of waters, and second by fire on the judgment day. So, you see, it's not surprising that a good man like Enoch couldn't be kept in a world as bad as ours. He walked and talked so much with angels that God finally took him to his new home in the sky.

Imagine what it must have been like to see such an event! Enoch didn't disappear mysteriously, leaving everyone to wonder where he had gone. In fact, many were present to see the amazing phenomenon. As he spoke one last time to the scoffing crowds, Enoch's face probably shone like an angel's. And then, as with Elijah, we can imagine a flash of light streaking down to the narrow city street. In an instant it caught up the prophet in its glorious grasp before curving heavenward and out of sight somewhere among the clouds.

What a moment in time! Imagine now, what if Enoch hadn't spent so much time with God? Well, then, he would have stayed in this world longer and then died like everyone else. For a man as godly as him, that would have been such a waste! Don't you wish you could experience such a thing? You can. Jesus has promised us that very same ride one day soon when Jesus comes.



Gabriel

“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.” Luke 1:19, NIV

Other than Lucifer, the angel name mentioned most often in the war between good and evil is Gabriel. When Lucifer abandoned his position beside God’s throne to stage a rebellion in heaven, someone had to take his place, and that someone was Gabriel. What an awesome privilege that would have been for him! Lucifer decided he would no longer take orders from the Sovereign of the universe, and Gabriel was asked to fill his shoes. Can you imagine that? Wouldn’t you feel excited and honored at being given such a job?

One of Gabriel’s major roles down through history has been to stand in the presence of God and serve as a special messenger to humans on earth. On one occasion he was sent to Babylon to explain a vision to Daniel. Then there’s the story of his visit to the temple to tell Zacharias he would have a son named John, who turned out to be the one who announced the Messiah. And, of course, Gabriel appeared to Mary, a young maiden in Nazareth, to tell her that she would give birth to the Son of God.

But the greatest moment in the years of Gabriel’s service must have been when he was sent by the Father to call Jesus from the grave. As he sped through the far reaches of space, he split the darkness of night with his supersonic speed. Then he rolled that massive stone from its place as though it were a pebble and commanded, “Jesus, Your Father calls You! Come forth!”

Can you imagine Gabriel following in Lucifer’s footsteps and refusing to obey the commands of the Father? I can’t, but what if he had? Certainly we would be calling him the second-biggest fool the universe has ever seen. When God gives us a job to do, as He did for Gabriel, we should do it. It’s an honor to serve our Creator, and who knows what exciting missions He will send us on?

JANUARY 8

Esau

When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah. Genesis 26:34, 35, NIV

Esau was a man's man! He was a rough character with lots of wild hair, and he felt most at home when he was hunting and fishing and doing all kinds of extreme sports. Unfortunately, he cared little for spiritual things. He didn't want to live by God's laws, and that's where all the trouble started. Exhibit A: When he turned forty he trashed all the rules by marrying pagan women, and that really broke his mother and father's heart. His parents were the head of a clan that worshiped the God of heaven, so marrying pagans created a big family scandal, as you can imagine. But it gets worse.

As the oldest son, Esau was in line for the family birthright, but he couldn't have cared less, at least for the spiritual end of it. Exhibit B: One afternoon he came home exhausted after a wild and woolly hunt. On Jacob's campfire was a pot of bubbling stew, and Esau had smelled it for miles downwind. He was ravenous, and within minutes he bartered away his birthright for a bowl of the campfire stew. "What good is a birthright to a dead man?" he growled.

And yet, we see as the story develops further, Esau had a fit when Jacob stole the birthright, which, by the way, Esau had already traded away for a bowl of stew. That's how Esau did things. But what if he had taken his responsibilities in the family more seriously? What if he had wished to honor God and live by heaven's rules? He would have saved Jacob a lot of trouble, and future generations of their descendants wouldn't have fought against each other constantly. As it turned out, Esau's descendants, the Edomites and Amalekites, made life miserable for the Israelites. Over and over again in the generations that followed, they were constantly at war with Israel. And to think that it all started over a bowl of stew.



Isaac

And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." Genesis 22:8

Isaac was one of the most wanted babies in history. For twenty-five years, God had been promising Abraham that Sarah would have a son. God always has His reasons for making His people wait, but to Abraham and Sarah it must have seemed like it would never happen. And we would have to agree. By the time Isaac finally came along, Abraham was a hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. Isaac was truly a miracle baby!

He was a good boy as he grew, obedient to his parents, and, like his father, had a strong faith in God. Everyone in his father's village loved him as the promised son. But it was the famous sacrifice he and his father made on Mount Moriah that made history. That Abraham would consider sacrificing Isaac seems barbaric to us today, and yet the story is classic. Isaac was about twenty years old by then, and he could have told his father, "Take a hike," but he didn't. Inspiration tells us he supported his father because he understood why God was asking them to do such a thing.

And, of course, the story has a good ending. As Isaac watched his father raise a knife to the sky, he heard an angel's voice from heaven telling them it was enough. Abraham and Isaac had helped God make His point. God would one day send His only Son to die. And then a ram in a nearby thornyicket was found to take Isaac's place, thus bringing the test of faith to an end. But what if Isaac had not agreed to go through with the sacrifice? What if he had said, "I'm out of here," and walked down off that mountain? Then, quite frankly, God's classic illustration for the universe about the coming sacrifice of Jesus would have never happened. No one would have blamed Isaac for refusing to take part. But, fortunately, he made it happen. Because of his part in the saga, he has a place in one of the greatest stories of all time.

JANUARY 10

Jacob

Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight. Proverbs 12:22

How would you like your nickname to be “cheater,” or “swindler,” or “sneak thief”? Take your pick, because that’s exactly what people called Jacob. In one afternoon he told his father three fateful lies that would haunt him for the rest of his life. In the years to come, how often he would wish he could go back to relive those moments. This is how it happened.

His mother knew he should get the family birthright instead of Esau. A birthright represented an inheritance of both money and spiritual leadership in the family, and Esau wasn’t fit to have either. God had told her this prophetically, but Isaac wouldn’t listen and finally decided one fateful day to give the birthright blessing to Esau anyway. Both Rebekah and Jacob knew the prize should be his, and to get it they were willing to go through quite a charade, but it was the lies that proved to be the clincher. When Isaac asked, “Who are you?” Jacob said, “I am Esau your firstborn.” When Isaac asked how Jacob had managed to catch the wild deer and prepare the meal so quickly, the smooth talker replied, “The Lord God brought it to me.” When Isaac pressed for further proof that he was indeed Esau, Jacob outright lied: “I am!” That’s how it is with lies. One lie calls for another to cover up the deceptions we weave.

But what if Jacob had refused to play the part of a lying cheat? Well, for one thing, he wouldn’t have had to leave home abruptly, and God would have honored him with the birthright in his own time. Secondly, Jacob wouldn’t have had to work fourteen long years to marry four angry women, who gave him twelve sons whose violent rivalries would make his life miserable over and over again. And finally, he never saw his mother again, the one who arranged the little scheme in the first place. Quite a price to pay for a pack of lies, don’t you think?



Laban

“Your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to hurt me.” Genesis 31:7

What would it have been like to be a member of Laban’s family? Who was this man, and why did he have such a bad rep? We don’t know much about his younger days before Jacob showed up, except that he was the son of Bethuel, who was the son of Nahor, who was the brother of Abraham—making him the grand-nephew of Abraham. But he was nothing like Uncle Abraham.

Laban was known to be a sneaky, conniving snake of a man. He jumped at the chance to have Jacob work seven years for the right to marry his daughter Rachel, only to deceive him by giving him Leah instead. And then Laban forced him to work another seven years for Rachel. How he managed to pull that off, we’ll probably never know. Leah wore a veil to the wedding, but that probably wouldn’t have been enough. Likely Laban got Jacob good and drunk at the feast so he would be clueless until the “I dos” were in his rearview mirror.

In addition, Laban was a nasty boss; he changed Jacob’s wages ten times because his son-in-law was getting richer every day. His plan was to get back some of that wealth, but it didn’t work out that way. Even worse, when Jacob tried to leave town with his wives and kids, Laban claimed they all belonged to him. What a nut! Not the relative you want to see at a family reunion.

What if he hadn’t been such a jerk? What if Laban had been kind to his daughters and Jacob? For one thing he would have had a happier life. Then, too, Jacob might have stuck around much longer and made Laban a very rich man. But that’s the way it is with greed. It makes us mean and spiteful, and it poisons our lives. Unfortunately, Laban knew all about that.

JANUARY 12

Eve

“You may be sure that your sin will find you out.” Numbers 32:23, NIV

This one is for the young ladies. Imagine for a moment that you are the most beautiful woman in the history of the world. No one can compare with you. Your skin tone is perfect, your hair the color of honey, your pearly whites the envy of all women in every age to come!

Imagine you have been given a home in paradise with cascading waterfalls spilling into pools of crystal-clear water ringed with lily pads. Your house is a forest glen scented with roses and jasmine, its roof a canopy of fruit-laden vines. You sleep on soft mosses in a moonlit glade and wake to the sweet songs of exotic birds.

Imagine that God has introduced you to the man of your dreams—tall, dark, and handsome. He is noble and funny and swifter than the eagles when he races through the open fields with zebras and cheetahs and every creature that was ever made to run with the wind. And he adores you. This man brings you flowers that will never fade. He climbs the highest trees to reach the most delightful of fruits for your noonday meal together. He smiles at your little antics, laughs at your silliest jokes, and worships the Creator with you every day as the gorgeous sun sets in the painted western sky.

Imagine your heavenly Father has given you all these gifts and more, and that He requires only one simple test of faith to demonstrate your gratefulness for these gifts—obedience to His Word. What will you do with this challenge?

Now, what if, like Eve, you should cast all these blessings aside for a few care-less minutes of shopping at a forbidden tree? Imagine the price you must pay for freedom and independence from your Father in heaven. Let’s rethink that choice and make the right ones today.



Job

In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong. Job 1:22

What's the worst thing that's ever happened to you? You had to get braces? You didn't make the basketball team? Your best friend stole your boyfriend or girlfriend? OK, those things can seem pretty bad sometimes, but what would it be like to have your whole world come crashing down in one day? You lose your Lamborghini, your house, your family business, any money you had in your Swiss bank accounts, and all your kids! In one day! That's ridiculous, you say!

Well, maybe, but that's exactly what happened to Job from the land of Uz, minus the car and Swiss bank accounts, of course. And if that weren't enough, he got really, really sick. His friends came by to share his grief, but they did more to discourage him than help.

Now, while all this was happening, Satan was doing his own brand of trash talking. He told God that Job wasn't worth saving, that he was only being faithful because God made him rich. But Job proved Satan wrong when he declared, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him," and, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that He will raise me up in the resurrection." Wow! Now that's a testimony!

But what if Job hadn't held true to his beliefs? What if he hadn't trusted God? What if he had cursed Him instead? Then Satan would have celebrated, and God would have been left holding the bag, so to speak. But praise God, Job did hang on! He knew God never asks us to endure more than we are able, and that good always wins in the end. And God blessed Job and gave him back everything he had lost, twice over.

JANUARY 14

Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain

Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Romans 1:21

Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain. Who were these characters? The three stooges? A band of brothers? Maybe. All were descendants of Cain, six generations removed from their evil great-great-great-great-grandfather. All of them chased the things of this world, and all became famous for being firsts in their generation.

Jabal was the first man to get rich breeding livestock for a living. In those days wealth was measured by how many animals you had. Cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys, and horses. And who knows? Maybe even elephants!

Jubal became a legend as a musician. We read in Genesis that he invented the harp and organ especially, and played them as well. His harp was a stringed instrument, probably very much like the one David played more than two thousand years later. The organ he made was maybe more like a flute, or perhaps several fastened together, like bagpipes.

And then there was Tubal-Cain. He was the first metal worker of the antediluvian world, the first to successfully use copper, bronze, and iron. This meant he knew how to shape metals into tools and weapons.

That's all we really know about the three brothers individually. We do know that they lived during the time of Enoch and Methuselah, and they may have even watched Noah build his ark and preach about a coming flood.

We have no word that they ever accepted Noah's message, but what if they had? What if they hadn't gotten caught up in making money and becoming famous? What if they had decided the wisdom of their Creator was more important than the foolishness of their own minds? Sad, isn't it. They gained much in this world, but lost their own souls in the process.