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REAL LIFE FAITH

**Bible Companions
for Catholic Teens**

Mary Elizabeth Sperry



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Introduction

[W]e are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses....

HEBREWS 12:1

Parts of the Bible are more than 4,000 years old. The people who wrote it lived thousands of miles away from us. Their lives focused around fishing and harvest and trades learned from their parents. How in the world could the Bible have anything to say to us? What can the people in the Bible teach us? After all, they lived in such a different world!

You might be surprised! Though parts of their lives were very different, the people in the Bible faced many of the same challenges we face today: peer pressure, feeling left out, feeling like no one took them seriously, looking for real friends, seeking good advice, and so on. Sound familiar?

When people of the Bible faced great challenges, they turned to God for the help they needed. In each chapter of this book, we'll look at one person from the Bible and how his or her story can help us see our lives in a new light. We'll look at what the Bible teaches us about the person's life and what that person can teach us. Each of these Bible companions illustrates a special quality that helps us grow closer to God and become the people we want to be—and the people God wants us to be. Each chapter includes questions to help you think about what you've read and maybe discuss it with your friends or youth group. Plus there are suggested Bible passages if you'd like to read more about the person.

You don't need to read this book straight through like a novel or a textbook. Feel free to skip around and read about the people who interest you the most—or about the ones who model qualities you'd like to acquire.

Even though these Bible companions walked the earth thousands of years ago, they wait to walk with you, helping you to find the path that will lead you to God.

Chapter 1

Cassidy: A Real-Life Abel

The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering.

GENESIS 4:4

Cassidy loved running cross-country. She wasn't the team star or anything like that. In fact, she'd never medaled in any competition. But even though she wasn't the fastest runner, she always tried her hardest. She showed up at every practice and paid attention to the drills rather than chatting with her teammates. Every day, Cassidy stretched, and she did strength training a few times a week. She watched what she ate—even limiting how often she ate potato chips, her favorite snack. Instead of texting friends and chatting online, she made sure she got enough sleep every night so she'd be at her best for cross-country practice after school.

Now, Cassidy wasn't one-dimensional. Cross-country wasn't her whole life. She was a good (but not great) student. She was a member of a few clubs and an active participant in her church's youth ministry. She wasn't a standout in anything she did, but she made a promise to herself that whatever she decided to do, she'd give it her very best. Sometimes she wondered if it was worth it. Why bother to work so hard if no one else did? Why give her best if she would never *be* the best?

Who Is Abel?

The Bible doesn't tell us much about Abel. In fact, it never records a single word he spoke. We know Abel was the second son of Adam and Eve. He had an older brother named Cain. When they grew up, Cain became a farmer, and Abel was a herder—probably of sheep and goats.

Both Cain and Abel offered sacrifices to God, offering up some of what they produced to the Lord. Cain offered some of the crops he had grown, and Abel offered the first animals born into his flock. God accepted Abel's offering, but he did not accept the sacrifice offered by Cain. The Book of Genesis doesn't tell us why God didn't accept Cain's offering. However, the Letter to the Hebrews suggests that Abel made his sacrifice to God in faith. Because of Abel's faith, his sacrifice was acceptable. This explanation suggests that Cain's motives in offering sacrifice may not have been as pure, but we can't tell from what is recorded in Genesis.

We do know that Cain was very upset when God rejected his sacrifice, and he became very jealous of Abel—so jealous, in fact, that Cain asked Abel to go with him into the fields. When they got to the field, Cain attacked and killed his brother, leaving his body in the field. Thus, Abel was the first murder victim.

While Abel's story ends there, Cain's does not. God, who knows what Cain has done, asks him where Abel is. Cain claims not to know and asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). God charges Cain with the murder of his brother and exiles Cain from the land that he has shared with his family, condemning him to wander the earth. But despite his grievous sin, God does not harm Cain physically. In fact, God offers him protection so that no one will harm him.

What Can Abel Teach Us?

For a guy who doesn't have even one recorded line in the whole Bible, Abel can teach us a lot. He teaches us about the importance of integrity and of giving God our best.

From the little we know of him, Abel was a man of integrity, acting from his faith to make a true sacrifice to the God he worshiped. Integrity is one of those words people use without thinking about what it means. Integrity comes from a root word meaning "whole." It means that the whole you—all the elements of your life—agree with one another. You aren't two-faced, the sort of person who behaves one way around one group of friends and a completely different way around another group. The way you behave is consistent with what you claim to believe. When you say you value something, you show it through your actions. So, for example, if you claim to value honesty, you don't tell lies or exaggerate the truth. Being a person of integrity means that people can rely on your word, knowing that you will back it up by what you do.

Integrity is an important part of being a holy person. It's not by accident that "whole" and "holy" sound so much alike. Being holy means your faith must infuse your whole life—not just for an hour at church each Sunday. You can't claim to be a person who follows Jesus unless you are willing to take steps to grow in your relationship with him. Since you can't be in a relationship with someone you don't know, you will want to learn more about your faith, even after you no longer have formal religious-education classes. Your faith will inform all aspects of your life, from who your friends are to how you spend your free time to what career you will pursue.

Deciding what you will do with your life is one of the biggest decisions facing most young people. Your parents, friends,

counselors, and others may offer advice, helping you identify your skills and interests and find career choices that use those skills and appeal to those interests. As a person of faith, however, your first question should be, “What is God calling me to do?” God calls each person to place his or her gifts at the service of the community and the kingdom of God.

Discerning God’s will for you is something you will do throughout your life. However, in the years immediately ahead of you, discerning your vocation will be an important task. A vocation is more than a career choice. It is the way God calls you to live in the world to serve the kingdom. You may be called to marriage and family life. You may be called to live as a single person. You may even be called to dedicate your life to the service of God’s people in the priesthood or consecrated life. Prayer, regular reception of the Eucharist and celebration of the sacrament of penance, and the advice of reliable counselors and quiet listening will help you to learn God’s will for you. Seeking and following God’s path will lead you to the greatest peace and fulfillment.

Whatever path you choose, follow Abel’s example. Abel chose to be a shepherd, and he offered the very best of his flock as a sacrifice to God. In the same way, we should offer God our very best in everything we do. Even if the tasks we face are not specifically religious (like attending Mass or helping on a service project), we can still offer our efforts to God. Whether it is schoolwork, chores, extracurricular activities, or helping a friend, we can give God our very best, asking that he accept all we do and have and are. The first step in offering ourselves to God is recognizing that, on our own, we can do nothing. Everything we do and have and are is a gift from God. Like Abel, by giving our best and caring for our brothers and sisters, we offer these gifts back to God in gratitude.

Sacrifice

When we hear the word “sacrifice,” we think about giving something up. For example, our Lenten sacrifice might be to give up a favorite snack food or a video game. But sacrifice is much more than that. The English word “sacrifice” actually comes from two Latin words that mean “to make holy.” So sacrifice isn’t just about giving something up. It is about offering something to God to make it holy. The goal of our sacrifice should be to grow in holiness.

Sacrifice begins by understanding that everything we have is a gift from God. By offering our gifts back to God, we show our gratitude and give God the praise and honor he deserves. We ask God to receive us and make us holy. We strive to use our gifts to serve God and others. Like Abel, we offer God the best we have, just because he’s God.

The most perfect sacrifice we can offer is the sacrifice of the Mass, the holy Eucharist. In the Mass, we remember, celebrate, and re-present the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the sacrifice that is our salvation. In the Mass, we gather our words and actions, our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, and join them to Jesus’ sacrifice, offering them to the Father in the Holy Spirit. We ask the Father to accept our sacrifice as he accepted the sacrifice of his servant Abel. And we receive Holy Communion, the Body of Christ, asking Jesus to live in us so that we may be made holy, as he is holy.

Farmers and Herders

Cain and Abel are the first examples of two of the most common occupations in the Bible: farmers and herders. People need to eat, so it isn’t surprising that the first jobs that appear focus on making sure that people have food. For the most part, farmers tend to settle and work in one place. They live where there’s good

soil and access to water for a long period of time—at least long enough to plant and harvest a crop. They need to store food from one harvest to the next. Herders, on the other hand, are typically nomadic. They move from place to place, living in tents, looking for pasture and water for their flocks. Depending on the availability of food and water, they may range over a small or a large territory. They roam farther when food and water are hard to find.

Read More About Abel

Genesis 4:1–16

Hebrews 11:4

Questions to Think About

1. How do I give back to God the gifts he has given me?
2. What keeps me from giving God my best?
3. Do I celebrate others' gifts, or am I jealous of them?

Prayer

*Heavenly Father,
thank you for the many gifts you have given me
that help me in life.
Help me to always use them
to serve you and your people,
so that I may praise you in all that I do.
Amen.*

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