

“Counted as Righteous”

Lesson Text: Romans 4:13–25 **Background Scripture:** Romans 4 **Devotional Reading:** Genesis 15:1–6

Romans 4:13–25 (NIV)

¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. ¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. ²² This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” ²³ The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To summarize Paul’s view of Abraham.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain faith’s role in being counted as righteous.
- **Daily Application:** To brainstorm ways to celebrate with loving actions God’s blessing of grace through faith.

INTRODUCTION

“The Primitive”

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s resistance to Nazi rule cost him his life in 1945. While directing an illegal seminary, Bonhoeffer wrote to his brother-in-law about his practice of daily Bible reading. He found that practice drew him back to the basics, or what he called “the primitive.” “In matters of faith,” he said, “we are always consistently primitive.” He meant that however elaborate our ideas or practices may be, we must always come back to our starting point: a fundamental attitude of trust in God’s mercy. Our text today focuses on this primitive foundation.

LESSON CONTEXT

Romans 4 is part of Paul’s overall argument supporting his statement in Romans 1:16–17:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Romans 1–3 explores God’s primary challenge in keeping the ancient promises, namely, the profound sinfulness of all human beings (3:23).

Chapter 4 begins the discussion of the remedy to universal sin. Far from facing a hopeless situation, humans have a model available to them of how to approach God. That model is the life of Abraham. When God promised that he would bless the world through Abraham, Abraham chose to respond in faith (Genesis 15:6; quoted in Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). Paul's readers, especially those of Jewish heritage, would have agreed that Abraham's legacy was important and valuable. The question in dispute is precisely what that legacy is. Paul argues that Abraham had a relationship with God because he placed his faith in God and trusted God's promises. Nothing else. In the New Testament, faith equals trust in God as the one who has promised to bless humanity. Jesus modeled that trust by submitting to his sacrificial death on a cross, being confident that God would work for good through Jesus' shame and suffering. That trust is the basis for any relationship with the same merciful God.

True Heirs of Abraham: Romans 4:13-14

Paul does not exclude the Jewish people from God's concern, nor does he minimize the importance of the Torah (the Law of Moses). But Paul builds on the insight that *the promise* predates *the law* (Romans 3:21-30) since *Abraham* lived before Moses (about 2167–1992 B.C. and 1530–1410 B.C., respectively) and the giving of the law (Exodus 19–20). Thus, it follows that the promise was the foundation of the law rather than the other way around (see Galatians 3:17).

The idea that Abraham would inherit *the world* comes in part from Genesis 12:1–3, which describes Abraham's offspring as a blessing to the world. However, Abraham's heritage was limited in geographical terms to the land between Egypt and Euphrates (Genesis 15:18; 13:14). But the promise was made to Abraham and *to his seed... through faith*.

Faith, which biblically might be defined as trust in God and His ability and intention to keep His promises, can characterize any person, not only those who were given the law. God is the God of all, both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 3:29). The relationship between God and humans rests on something deeper than the law, the thing that characterizes one group but not the other. That deeper reality is faith in Jesus. God chooses to credit us with righteousness when we come to Him through such faith. Through the righteousness that only comes from God's gift to us, we also stand to inherit the world as promised to Abraham.

1. What was promised to Abraham? (Romans 4:13-14)

What Do You Think?

How does your life reflect your trust in God?

Digging Deeper

What difference does it make that you cannot and do not need to try to earn righteousness?

The promise of inheriting the world must be understood in relationship to the Messiah's future domination of this earth as "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (Revelation 19:16). The promise will come to reality when the seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ, sits on the throne of David during the Millennium and rules the entire world with a rod of iron. Because of this, it is impossible that Abraham's inheritance can be obtained by the law. No heir of Abraham, save Jesus Christ, has ever been able to entirely keep the law. If fulfilment of the promise depended on law keeping, man's inability to keep the law would ensure that the promise would never be fulfilled and thus *the promise is worthless* (v. 14 of today's lesson).

Supporting Arguments: Romans 4:15-16

Eventually failure to keep the law imposes penalties which bring to the law-breaker the wrath of God.

The law could define sin's precise contours and clarify what effects it has, but it cannot save. It brings wrath, that is, it provokes God's anger when humans break His law. Since God's wrath is justified and necessary to bring about justice, the law's function to notify us of boundaries serves a spiritually useful purpose.

Verse 16 makes two interrelated points. First, God's saving work extends to all who will receive it in *faith* by trusting God's promises and counting on God's mercy, justice, and protection. The Law of Moses was a gift from God for previously enslaved people so that they could experience a life of real freedom (Deuteronomy 30:11–20). Its many provisions tended toward building a community of mutual support and justice (examples: Exodus 22; Deuteronomy 15). Second, the promise to bless the world (Genesis 12:1–3) extends to all who imitate *Abraham* in trusting God. Descent from the patriarch involves not ancestral DNA (Luke 3:8) but a similar faith-filled life. God's work was bigger than the law could accommodate, and God's *grace* extends to both Jews and Gentiles who trust Him.

2. What's the difference between the consequence of the law and the consequence of faith? (Romans 4:15-16)

Abraham's Trust: Romans 4:17-22

Verse 17 offers evidence for the previous verses' assertions by quoting Genesis 17:5. Part of a story of renewed promises to Abraham, this statement reveals the enormous consequences of the then-soon-to-be-fulfilled promise of a child, Isaac (see Genesis 21:1–7). The promise extends even to the raising of *the dead*. This happened metaphorically for Abraham and Sarah, who were long past childbearing age (see also Hebrews 11:12), and literally for Jesus as “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). The entire story of Israel and the church is one of unimagined possibilities coming to life thanks to God's saving work.

Verse 18 of today's lesson repeats the promises to *Abraham*. Here, to hope against hope means that Abraham had no natural basis for believing he and Sarah could have a child. He and his wife had long passed the age of childbearing, and Sarah was postmenopausal (Genesis 17:17). The childbirth required a miracle, and the couple trusted God to provide that without knowing how it would occur.

3. What's different about the way Abraham hoped? (Romans 4:17-18)

What Do You Think?

How often do you speak of hope as a wish or a dream?

Digging Deeper

How could your witness of hope be strengthened if you only used the word to refer to hope based on God's promises?

Paul ignores indications of Abraham's doubts in Genesis 15:2–3 and his ill-conceived attempt to “help” God by impregnating Hagar (Genesis 16). We might be encouraged that such major lapses in judgment and trust did not nullify Abraham's faith.

Instead, Paul's argument focuses on Abraham's ultimate acceptance of God's trustworthiness. In verse 21 of today's lesson we see that Abraham was not just wishfully hoping that God would make him the father of many nations, but *was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised*. “This is why” (v. 22) because of Abraham's faith in God in the face of adverse circumstances, his faith was imputed to him for righteousness.

4. What can we do to strengthen our faith in spite of current circumstances? (Romans 4:19-22)

What Do You Think?

Do you react differently to a broken promise if the promise-maker lacks the power rather than the will to fulfill it? Why or why not?

Digging Deeper

What other examples can you provide of both God's willingness and ability to fulfill His promises? (e.g. recall past breakthroughs and blessings in your life from God).

Our Basis of Hope: Romans 4:23–25

If God was to keep the promise to Abraham that he would become the ancestor of many nations, then the act of crediting righteousness to him based on faith must extend to others who do the same thing. Otherwise, God would be a respecter of persons, a player of favorites (which we know is not true, see: Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11–16; Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9). History teaches us that what God promises, He also performs!

Whereas Abraham trusted God's promise of descendants who would bless the world, Paul's readers, ancient and modern, trust in the promise God sealed by raising Jesus from the dead. Simply believing that the resurrection of Jesus happened historically does not equate to having saving faith (compare James 2:19). To believe in the resurrection means to imitate Christ in his sufferings (2 Corinthians 13:4; Galatians 2:19–20; Philippians 3:10–11; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14). It means to trust in the final resurrection of the dead, of which Jesus' resurrection is the promissory note (1 Corinthians 15:20–28). Jesus died on the account of our sins, and was raised from the dead in order to render us righteous in the eyes of God! (*for our justification*).

5. How do we know that faith was not only credited to Abraham? (Romans 4:23-25)

CONCLUSION

We Are Not Alone

God counts us as righteous when we, like Abraham, trust the promises of redemption and live accordingly. We are not righteous because of the good we do or the evil we avoid, but because God acknowledges us as loyal to Him, staking all our hopes on His promises. And His offer of salvation extends to all because sin has wrecked us all. We stand together in both our need and our hope.

This unity of humanity may show itself in different ways. We might wallow together in our sin, growing increasingly hostile to each other and sacrificing our common humanity on the altar of greed, envy, pride, and hatred. Or we might acknowledge our need, trust in God's mercy, and so join in a community built on such a faith. The choice belongs to us. How do we build a community on such a basis? A church full of people who trust in God's promises live generous, open-hearted, kind lives. They, like Abraham, show hospitality to strangers as though they were angels (Hebrews 13:2). Such a church values the whole trajectory of a person's life of faith, emphasizing neither failures nor heroic successes but faithfulness in the face of adversity (James 1:2–3) and God's seeming slowness to act (2 Peter 3:9). This community of believers knows itself to be saved, not because of its own merits but because of God's mercy.

PRAYER

God of Abraham and all who trust You, focus our minds not on our own limitations but on Your great love for Your creation. Thank You for Jesus' sacrifice, which we accept in faith as reconciling us to You. In His name, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Justification by faith is not an abstract idea but a reality for life.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Reconciled to God" where we can commit to sharing with an unbeliever a personal story of what life was like before and after being reconciled to God. Study Romans 5:1-11.