

The Faith of Abraham

Bible Background • ROMANS 4

Printed Text • ROMANS 4:1-12 | Devotional Reading • GENESIS 15:1-6

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will STUDY the difference between faith and works as manifested in the life of Abraham, REFLECT on the knowledge and wisdom of Paul as seen in his understanding of the Old Testament, and IDENTIFY ways in which we rely on our faith for a relationship with God.

In Focus

“Hi, Daddy,” said Zona Jackson Moore as her father entered the arid room where families met with inmates. Nelson Jackson could barely recognize his little girl in the face of the woman who stood before him. He had last seen her when she had to move across the country for college years ago. Nelson had only spoken to the man she married in letters. Now Zona had made a special trip back home so everyone could meet her new baby. “Daddy, this is my husband, Roy, and our baby girl, Faith,” introduced Zona. “Faith, yes, the perfect name,” said Nelson. “How I need faith these days. Can I hold her?” Roy placed the baby in his arms and said, “Mr. Jackson, we have never believed the awful things they said you did. We have faith and we’re praying that one day you will be vindicated and released.”

It would be another ten years before new DNA tests would prove Nelson’s innocence. Waiting at the prison gates the morning of his release were Zona, Roy, and Faith. Though well into his 70s, Nelson ran to hug them and picked up Faith. “Faith, how precious you are,” said Nelson. “And, now that I’m free, I will continue to share my faith with everyone. While I was imprisoned, I never stopped preaching about faith in God, and many men, both inmates and guards, gave their lives to Jesus. God said I’d be cleared, and He kept His promise. Faith in the goodness of God is the hope of the world.”

Salvation is a gift to all who will receive it. In today's lesson, we will examine the case that the Apostle Paul makes to show that rules, traditions, and actions that bar people from the gift of God's love and grace have no place in the body of Christ.

Keep in Mind

“For the Scriptures tell us, ‘Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith’” (Romans 4:3, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Faith (Romans 4:5) *pistis* (Gk.)— Assurance, belief, trust, and fidelity

B. Sign (v. 11) *semeion* (Gk.)—An event, activity, or thing that possesses a deeper meaning than a surface level interpretation can provide

Say It Correctly

Chaldean. kall-DEE-an.

Terah. TARE-ah.

KJV

Romans 4:1 What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?

2 For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God.

3 For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.

4 Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.

5 But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

6 Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works,

7 Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.

8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.

9 Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.

10 How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.

11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:

12 And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.

NLT

Romans 4:1 Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God?

2 If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God's way.

3 For the Scriptures tell us, "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith."

4 When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned.

5 But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.

6 David also spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who are declared righteous without working for it:

7 “Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight.

8 Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of sin.”

9 Now, is this blessing only for the Jews, or is it also for uncircumcised Gentiles? Well, we have been saying that Abraham was counted as righteous by God because of his faith.

10 But how did this happen? Was he counted as righteous only after he was circumcised, or was it before he was circumcised? Clearly, God accepted Abraham before he was circumcised!

11 Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised. So Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith but have not been circumcised. They are counted as righteous because of their faith.

12 And Abraham is also the spiritual father of those who have been circumcised, but only if they have the same kind of faith Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The People, Places, and Times

Abraham. Abraham was originally from Ur, which was Chaldean territory in modern-day Iraq. He was the son of Terah, who was a descendant of Shem, one of Noah’s sons. Noah had declared the Lord God’s blessing over Shem who, with his brother, covered Noah when he was naked (Genesis 9:18–26). Later, God would declare an even greater blessing over Abraham: he would have fertile land, blessings, and descendants as numerous of the stars and the sand.

Circumcision. In ancient Israel, this act (removing the foreskin of the male sex organ) was performed as a ritual on all male children on the eighth day after birth. In the Jewish faith, it was an external symbol of one’s total and complete allegiance and devotion to Yahweh. Controversy arose in the early church over the circumcision of Gentile converts (Acts 15:13–18). During the first century AD, Jews frowned upon non-circumcision among Christians. Apostle Paul played a crucial role in settling the dispute. He determined that physical circumcision was not essential to Christian faith and fellowship. Circumcision of the heart through repentance and faith were the only requirements of the faith.

Background

This letter to Christian believers in Rome was written by the Apostle Paul between AD 56 and AD 58 when he was living in Corinth, a Grecian port city. It is thought that the emerging Christian belief had made its way to Rome from Jewish believers who had heard about Jesus Christ during visits to Jerusalem and on returning to Rome, shared the good news with both Jews and Gentiles. In AD 49, Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews. After he died around AD 54, Jewish Christians returned to Rome and found Gentile believers leading a growing number of Christ-followers.

Well entrenched in the rules and regulations of the Jewish tradition, these Jewish Christians believed that Gentile believers needed to adhere to the practice of circumcision which had been established by the patriarch of their faith, Abraham. The letter to the Romans offers a well-developed explanation of God's interaction with humanity since creation and the fall, the preeminent role of belief in Jesus Christ for humanity's redemption, and the faithful response of believers when they rightly understand that salvation is a gift that had been made available to Jews and Gentiles alike—not through human works— but by belief in the sacrificial life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At-A-Glance

1. Faith Builds Relationship (Romans 4:1-3)
2. Faith Becomes Righteousness (vv. 4-8)
3. Faith Begets Works (vv. 9-12)

In Depth

1. Faith Builds Relationship (Romans 4:1-3) The Jewish people have always recognized Abraham as a progenitor for their national lineage and monotheistic faith. Abraham was the person who had dared to leave the plurality of gods that his ancestors worshiped to accept an invitation to follow the God who they saw as the One True and Living God. This God blessed Abraham with great riches and gave him an incredible promise—he and his wife Sarah would have a son. As years passed and they were well beyond child-bearing age, their faith in God's promise was tested. Abraham and Sarah would have to continually prevail in faith, trusting in the God who had made the promise, not their ability to get things done through human effort. For Abraham's descendants, Abraham was the model of faithfully walking with God. Humanly speaking, that was a legacy to be proud of. Yet, in the presence of a holy and righteous God, no one, not even Abraham, could brag about accomplishments, natural or spiritual.

Name some of the ways Abraham's and Sarah's faith was tested as they waited for God to fulfill His promise.

2. Faith Becomes Righteousness (vv. 4-8) Human effort earns human rewards, like large salaries, or trophies, and accolades. Faith in God, however, gives something much more significant—a relationship that puts a person in good standing with God. Abraham was given such right standing, not because he had done any specific work, but because God attached right standing to his faith. Only God could perform the work necessary to bridge the divide that had been created by sin (Genesis 3). To be declared right with God is a gift from God that can only be received, never earned. The appropriate human response to God's merciful initiative is acceptance, obedience, and thankfulness.

Why would the Apostle Paul choose Abraham and David to make his argument that people are saved by faith, not their works?

3. Faith Begets Works (vv. 9-12) The Apostle Paul points out that Abraham was given right standing with God and received the incredible promise of a son before he was circumcised. This crediting of right standing had been declared roughly two decades before Abraham was circumcised. Circumcision then was a response from Abraham that he had accepted God's pronouncement, and he was thankful for the amazing gift of relationship with God. For uncircumcised Gentiles who had placed their faith in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ, this message from Paul showed that God's forgiveness and acceptance had been given to someone who was uncircumcised. Abraham, as presented in Paul's discourse, was to be seen as the father of all who faithfully followed the God of their forefather and the promised Son through whom all the world would be blessed. Abraham was more than the father of those who were circumcised, he also was the father of anyone who put their faith in Jesus Christ.

What role, if any, does works of righteousness have in the life of those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ?

Search the Scriptures

1. In your own words, what is the meaning of "imputed" (Romans 4:6)?
2. Explain why righteousness has to be recognized as a gift and not a reward for right living. (Romans 4:4-8)

Discuss the Meaning

When an African American billionaire announced that he would pay off the college loans of nearly 400 young men at a historically black college, the news went viral. Without such a gift, many of those graduates would have lived under the burden of debt for decades. Two millennia before, another man paid off a significant debt. Jesus Christ wiped out humanity's debt to sin and declared that through faith, anyone can have access to a relationship with Him.

1. Have you ever benefited from the generosity of others? What was your response?
2. What are some ways to make the news of Jesus' gift of salvation go viral?

Liberating Lesson

A woman entered the church wearing a black niqab. That isn't our look for Sunday worship, thought a woman whose father was a founder of her denomination. "You can't dress like that here or in heaven," she admonished the visitor. "Find out our traditions and come back next week." The pastor, seeing the visitor heading for the door, left the pulpit and ran to stop her. "Please sit over here," he assured. "The doors of God's church are open to anyone who has the faith and courage to enter."

What do you know about the cultural and religious practices of other religious traditions? What might be the first step toward greater understanding?

Application for Activation

Debates over circumcision rarely arise today, but conflicts over other religious rituals, practices, and norms continue to keep the body of Christ divided about who is in right standing with God. Think about a religious difference you have recently noticed. Take the position of the side you are opposed to and defend it as vigorously as you would defend your position. Identify ways the

opposing position extends the redemptive grace of God to more people. What are some ways that you can invite people who hold your point of view to look at the conflict from another's perspective?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Romans 4:1–12 1 What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? Nothing. That is the appropriate response to Paul's rhetorical question in this verse. There is nothing that we can say Abraham gained according to the flesh. The term "pertaining to the flesh," is from the Greek words kata sarka (KA-ta SAR-ka). In this letter to the Romans, this phrase depicts the lower and external aspects of human life that are juxtaposed to the higher and internal aspects of human life, especially for the believer. Rather than a life that is kata sarka, Paul suggests implicitly here and more explicitly in Romans 8:1-13 (and other places) that believers are to live a life kata pneuma (puh-NEW-muh) or according to the Spirit. Therefore, Paul seeks to emphasize that Abraham, the ancestor of believers, did not gain anything according to the flesh, but as we will see below, Abraham's faith is a key to how to gain everything according to the Spirit. Similarly, we should make sure that we focus on strengthening our spiritual walk with God rather than focusing on superficial items that will ultimately leave us empty.

2 For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. Abraham's response to God is critical for this passage and for understanding Paul's thinking.

One of the words that is key for understanding this passage is the word dikaio (dee-KAI-oh), which has been translated as "justified." This translation both veils and reveals how Paul uses this word. The root of this word is at work behind the two times that "justified" appears in this text, which is clear in verses 2 and 5. However, what is not as clear is that the same word is at the root behind the word translated as "righteousness," which is the Greek word dikaiosune (dee-kai-oh-SOO-nay) in verses 2 and 5. You can see how the two words are related. If we start with the noun dikaiosune, it can provide insight on how to interpret the verbs translated as "justified."

Dikaioisune here is righteousness or better justice, which captures the preferred status in which people should stand in relationship to their covenant with God. This covenantal relationship extends back into the Hebrew Bible. A believer should desire to be in good standing in their covenant with God, which is in a position of justice. The word dikaoisune will appear as justice/righteousness throughout this section to remind the reader of this discussion. The way that one gets into this position is captured in the way that dikaio as a verb in verse 2 is in the passive voice. This means that the subject (the believer) does not do the action, but rather the action happens to them. The verb here is communicating how one is placed into a position of justice/righteousness. Therefore, Paul is communicating how Abraham becomes a person of justice/righteousness, first by stating what Abraham did not do to be justified. Abraham was not justified or made into a person of justice/righteousness by “works.” Works here refers to the rite of circumcision.

Abraham being a person of justice/ righteousness is key for Paul’s argument, and that is the reason he lifts him up as an example. As believers, our position as people of justice/ righteousness is fundamental to our witness in the world. We cannot fall to the temptation to want to boast about our religiosity or “super” spirituality. Nor can we rest on the fact that we have been placed in right standing in relationship by our covenant with God. Our being in right standing with God implies that our lives should be marked by commitment to being persons of justice/righteousness. To live as that type of person, our spiritual walk has to be nurtured from a deep reserve of faith.

3 For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. To further explain how Abraham is justified or made into a person of justice/righteousness, Paul appeals to the Scripture in Genesis 15:6. In that passage, after God tells Abram (later called Abraham) that he would have countless descendants, Abram believed God. And God credited the belief to Abram as justice/ righteousness.

Two more words are important for interpreting this passage. The first is the Greek word behind what is translated as “believed.” This is the word *pisteuo* (pis-te-OO-oh). It can certainly mean to believe, but it also can mean to trust and to be faithful to something. This is the same word in verse 5 behind the term translated “the one who ... trusts.” This word is also the verb form of the word *pistis*, which is translated as faith. *Pistis* is the noun form of believing, trusting, and being faithful. Therefore, the English words faith, belief, trust, and faithfulness (fidelity) capture the range of meanings that *pistis* has. Because it has such a wide range, the Greek word *pistis* will appear throughout the rest of the lesson to remind the reader of the interpretive possibilities. It is Abraham’s faith (*pistis*) to God that God credits as justice/righteousness.

This gets us to the next term *logizetai* (lo-GEEze- tai). This term is an accounting term, which is why the translation of it as “credit” captures how Paul uses it here. God takes Abraham’s faith (*pistis*) and gives Abraham credit as a person of justice/righteousness. God places justice/righteousness in Abraham’s account because of his first act of faithfulness (*pistis*) to God. Because Abraham trusts God’s promise, God trusts Abraham with righteousness/justice. As

believers, our faith (pistis) in God uncovers God's faith (pistis) in us. It is important to recognize that not only are we to have faith (pistis) in God but to also know that God has faith (pistis) in us.

God has placed justice/righteousness in our accounts anticipating us to act as agents of justice and righteousness. God is counting on us to be His representatives in the world. Whether at home, work, church, or social groups our faith (pistis) should manifest and communicate that we have a covenant relationship with God and that we want to see God's purpose revealed in our lives and the world.

4 Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. 5 But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Paul continues to explain how one becomes credited as a person of righteousness/justice. He uses wordplay and compares the works that did not get Abraham justified (i.e. circumcision) with the work of one who labors for wages. The laborer who works for their wages is not paid out of the benevolence of their employer. Put another way, we do not find our bosses particularly generous when they pay us for the time we worked. The pay is what is owed. However, if one receives money that they did not work for as a bonus, then it is a gift. It is credited or added to a worker without the giver receiving anything in return. The credit adds to the person and impacts how they live their lives moving forward without necessarily being linked to their past actions or inactions. For Paul, this is how people are placed into position as people of justice/righteousness. It is not because the individual has earned such a position. One does not need to put an item on credit if it has already been earned or paid for. God would not have to apply righteousness/ justice into the account of believers if they had already earned it, but we had not earned it. God had to give it to us on credit anticipating that we would live into it. This is particularly the case for Paul's primarily Gentile audience. The Greek word behind "ungodly" is asebe (as-eh- BAY), which highlights how Gentiles, from a Jewish perspective, worshiped false gods. In this way, they had a similar background to Abraham, whose father made idols (Joshua 24:2). But after hearing God, Abraham trusted God and God credited him with justice/ righteousness. Similarly, Gentiles, who before hearing preaching like Paul's, were not in covenant with the God of Israel and did not pursue justice or righteousness. But now they are granted an opportunity to be a part of the covenant. They can gain access to God's covenant by trusting the One who can even transform immoral idol worshipers into people of justice/righteousness. That type of trust (pistis) is what God uses as collateral to credit justice/righteousness into the account of those who exhibit it.

God's miraculous grace manifests toward us and God chooses to credit righteousness/ justice to our account even before we live into it. We do not have to earn God's approval or God's plan for our lives. Our trust (pistis) starts us on a journey of making God's presence real in our lives and the lives of those around us. Our faith (pistis) also allows us to recognize that our opportunity to be in relationship with God is a gift that we did not earn and we can share it with others by expanding the covenant to others and pursuing justice and righteousness in our homes, communities, nations, and world.

6 Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, 7 Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.

Paul incorporates another passage from the Scripture to further illustrate his point about how God places justice/righteousness into people's accounts. He appeals to Psalm 32 where the word *logizetai* describes the blessed state of one whom the Lord has not credited with sin. This passage serves three purposes for Paul's argument. The first is that it demonstrates that God can credit one with justice/righteousness or with sin. The second purpose assumes that the speaker in the psalm is guilty and that God can choose to discredit one's account, especially of sin, if God chooses to. Both of these elements demonstrate God's sovereignty over how justice/righteousness and sin/iniquity get accounted for in God's ledger. The third purpose is to illustrate that works (particularly circumcision) are not how God credits accounts.

One of the greatest blessings is to know that God is not in heaven primarily keeping a record of our mistakes and shortcomings. God is more concerned with forgiving and transforming us into people of justice/righteousness than condemning us because of our mistakes. This should both prevent us from comparing ourselves with others in boastful ways, and it should remind us of the constant work that we have toward becoming all of who God has called us to be. It is a blessing to not be shackled to the past. The blessing is to not have our past held against us. The blessing is also to avoid recreating our past in the present, and the blessing is to create a future that is not bogged down by that past. That is a state of blessedness indeed.

9 Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. 10 How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. These verses highlight Paul's main contention in this passage—the irrelevance of circumcision for Gentile believers. He uses Psalm 32 to interpret Genesis 15. He launches from the blessed state discussed in Psalm 32 into his critique of circumcision as a requirement to be credited as a person of justice/righteousness. He uses Abraham's life as proof positive that circumcision is not a prerequisite for participating in covenant with the God of Israel. This is significant because circumcision could have been a significant deterrent for many male Gentiles who did not practice circumcision. Some of Paul's contemporaries, no doubt, suggested that to participate in covenant with the God of Israel, men had to be circumcised. We find evidence of people having differing views about this issue in Acts 15 and Galatians 2.

Often discussions about works or circumcision lead to interpretations of Romans that suggest that Paul is abandoning the Torah (Law); however, that is not the case. Paul, as a Jewish believer in Christ, would have found it unthinkable to abandon the Law. As a matter of fact, he is using the Law (the book of Genesis, the first book of the Torah) to make his claim about how Gentile men do not need to be circumcised to participate in the covenant and to be credited with righteousness/justice. Paul uses Abraham's life as a legal test case of how God chooses to make people who act in faithfulness to God people of righteousness/justice. Although Paul is primarily addressing a Gentile audience, he makes a Jewish argument to explain that since Abraham was

credited with righteousness/ justice before he was circumcised, God does not require circumcision before justifying Gentiles.

Paul desires to emphasize that it is faith (pistis) that most concerns God. It is faith (pistis) that is credited into the believer's account as righteousness/justice. Faith (pistis) is more than a creedal assent to certain doctrines or formulas. It is about placing one's life completely in the hands of God and faithfully submitting to God's plan. That is what moves God to credit righteousness/justice into one's account. This type of commitment could not be reduced to following one component of the Law—circumcision. Faith (pistis) actually is the foundation for the Law and God's covenantal relationship with God's people. Hence, Abraham had faith (pistis) even before he was circumcised.

11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: 12 And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. Paul describes Abraham's circumcision as a "sign." The Greek word is semeion (say- MAY-on) and captures the notion of an event, activity, or thing that possesses a deeper meaning than a surface level interpretation can provide. Circumcision is this type of sign. For Abraham, it is more than a ritual; it is a representation of something much deeper—his faith (pistis) in God.

Paul further explains the sign as a seal. The Greek word sphragida (sfra-GEE-duh) is the type of seal an official put on a letter to make sure that its contents were not tampered with until it arrived at its destination. Similarly, righteousness/justice through faith (pistis) sealed Abraham even though he had not been circumcised. His faith was able to preserve him as a person of justice/righteousness even before his circumcision. Paul uses this to emphasize how our faith (pistis) can preserve us even before we know how God wants to use us.

Paul understands God's crediting of justice/ righteousness to Abraham before he was circumcised as an indication that God wanted to make Abraham the ancestor of those who have faith (pistis) regardless of the status of their circumcision. This means that God's covenant has expanded to include both Jews and Gentiles, both circumcised and uncircumcised. Abraham is the model of faith to the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Even more important than those labels, Abraham is the ancestor and example to all people who have faith (pistis).

Abraham becomes a role model without knowing exactly how God was going to do what He has promised because he believed anyway. Abraham became a model for justice and righteousness even when he was still imperfect, because he acted in faithfulness to God anyway. Abraham received a credit to his account that would benefit his descendants because he trusted a covenant that he was the first to participate in. Paul raises Abraham's life as an example to the community in Rome and to believers everywhere to live a life of faith that inspires others to have faith. We are called to make good on the credit of justice/righteousness that God has placed into

our account by leaving a faithful legacy that will cause generations after us to be blessed because of our faith.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Apollos and Paul, Builders
(1 Corinthians 3:1-11)

TUESDAY

Entrusted to Take Gospel to Gentiles
(Galatians 2:1-10)

WEDNESDAY

Grace and Peace to All
(Romans 1:1-7)

THURSDAY

God's Righteous Wrath
(Romans 1:18-23)

FRIDAY

God's Actions Are Fair and Just
(Romans 1:24-32)

SATURDAY

God's Righteous Actions for Saints, Sinners
(2 Peter 2:4-9)

SUNDAY

The Gospel Changes Jews and Gentiles
(Romans 1:8-17)