



A Faith Like Abraham

Lesson 6 | Romans 4:1-25

“How can I be saved from God’s wrath?” is the most important question that could ever be asked. Paul has been arguing that both the rebel and the moralist stand condemned for having broken God’s laws, so what can we do? Paul’s solution is not to try harder. It is not to do good things to make up for the bad things we have done. Yet that is the common belief of most people. People tend to think that if I’ve screwed up I should make things right. The gospel says that you earn a righteous standing before God, you must accept what he has done freely as a gift.

Why do you think people want to do good things to make up for the bad things they have done?

What are some of the ways that people try to earn God’s forgiveness?

It is hard for people today to believe that their good works won’t earn them a right relationship with God, but it would have been even harder for many Jews. Paul has just made the case that salvation is not based on keeping the law but is instead solely based on trusting in Jesus Christ. As we discussed, that would be hard to accept if you had grown up your whole life believing that your relationship with God was based on keeping or not keeping the law. Long held beliefs die hard, so Paul pulls out an argument he knows will be persuasive to his Jewish audience: Abraham was declared righteous because of his faith, not by keeping the law.

If Abraham was justified by faith, why do you think so many Jews looked to their keeping of the law for their justification?

Throughout this section Paul says the same thing from different perspectives. He argues that our righteousness comes from faith, not from works (4:1-12). He will show that God’s promise of eternal blessing is rewarded on the basis of faith, not a keeping of the law (4:13-21). Finally, Paul will apply this very clearly to his contemporary audience, showing us that we too must believe in Jesus Christ and Jesus alone (4:22-25).

Justification Is by Faith, Not Works (4:1-12)

Have your group read these verses. Ask what words you see repeated throughout.

If you were to take out colored pencils and start underlining words that we repeat in this section, the key themes that Paul is emphasizing would become clear. First, you are going to see the word “justify” or

“righteousness” show up eight times (v 2, 3, 5 [x2], 6, 9, 11 [x2]).¹ You would see the word “faith” or “believe” show up seven times (v 3, 5 [x2], 9, 11 [x2]).² You would see the word “count,” “impute,” or “reckon” show up 8 times (v 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11).³ Not surprisingly, these three themes are highlighted in the verse that Paul uses in his beginning discussion about Abraham – “Abraham *believed* God, and it was *counted* unto him for *righteousness*” (Romans 4:3, quoting Genesis 15:6). Paul builds his case by arguing from Abraham’s example that justification is apart from works (4:1-5), arguing from David’s example the blessings of sin forgiven is by faith (4:6-8), and finally showing that Abraham’s true children are those who have faith, not those who have works (4:9-12).

Abraham’s example shows justification apart from works (4:1-5)

Paul is trying to help his Jewish audience see that what he is teaching is not something entirely new, but rather that being right with God has always depended on faith. To do this he takes the case of Abraham and reminds his people that the Scriptures show how Abraham was declared righteous before God – through his faith. If the great hero of the Jewish people was declared righteous by faith, how much more would this need to be true of his descendants!

The way Jews thought about Abraham is hard for us to relate to. As Americans, we don’t follow our genealogies too carefully, and few if any of us have great ancestors of our past we can proudly declare we are related to. We may have national heroes, like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, but we don’t think about them like the Jews thought about Abraham. He defined them as a people. They were very proud that they were his children. In fact, in one of Jesus’s arguments with the Jews, they argued that because they were Abraham’s children, they were never in bondage (John 8:33)!

Why do you think the Jews viewed Abraham with such high regard?

Paul argues that if Abraham was able to be declared righteous based on his actions, that would give him the ability to boast (4:2) and that God’s reward would be owed to Abraham rather than being a free gift of grace (:4-5). While Abraham would eventually offer his son as a sacrifice to God, that is not when he is declared righteous. This sacrifice takes place in Genesis 22, but Abraham is declared to be righteous in Genesis 15:6. This means that Abraham is declared righteous because he believed, not because he did good things!

Why do you think that God wants salvation to be by grace and not works?

Why do you think God wants to avoid boasting?

David’s example shows justification apart from works (4:6-8)

But it isn’t just Abraham. The most famous king of Israel teaches the same principle: justification is not based on works which we have done. Paul here quotes from Psalm 32, a famous Psalm showing David repent of his sin. In these verses David talks about the blessing of those to whom God does not impute the guilt of their sin. David had sinned grievously against God, yet God freely forgave the humble and repentant David. David didn’t have to “do” anything to earn God’s forgiveness, he enjoyed the freeness of God’s forgiveness as a blessing.

¹ These are both from the same Greek root, *dike*.

² These are both from the same Greek root, *pistis*.

³ These are all from the same Greek word, *logizomai*.

Why doesn't God require good works from us before He forgives us? Why does He freely forgive our sins?

Abraham's true children are those of faith, not of works (4:9-12)

In this final section, Paul once again addresses the question of circumcision. The Jews thought that they had a special claim to Abraham. After all, he was their biological ancestor, and they had been circumcised like him as a sign of the special covenant made as descendants of the son of promise, Isaac. But Paul reminds them that Abraham was actually declared righteous *before* he was circumcised. Abraham is circumcised in Genesis 17 as a sign of the covenant God is making with him, but he is declared righteous in Genesis 15 because he believes God. So Paul is the father of those who are circumcised, but he can also be the father of those who aren't circumcised. The key to being the true heir to Abraham is not what your lineage is or whether you have been circumcised, but do you have faith?

In what ways might someone think they have special access to God that others don't have because of certain privileges that have nothing to do with faith?

The Promise Is by Faith, Not the Law (4:13-21)

Once again, consider having your group read through these verses again and note the words that stand out as being frequently repeated.

In the previous section, the focus was on justification by faith versus works. In this section, we see the same general idea but with slightly different concepts. The word "promise" shows up five times (v 13, 14, 16, 20, 21), the word "faith" or "believe" shows up seven times (v 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20), and the word "law" shows up five times (v 13, 14, 15 [x2], 16). Paul is arguing that the promise God made to Abraham and to his offspring would be realized because Abraham believed God, not because he kept the Jewish law.

Abraham could not have inherited the promise through the law (4:13-16)

Throughout this section Paul teaches that the promise which came to Abraham came before the law was given at Sinai. But what promise is Paul talking about? He clarifies that promise in verse 13 – that Abraham should be the heir of the world. If we go back to Genesis, we will see that God had promised Abraham he would be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-3), he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 15:1-6; 17:1-22), and he would possess the land of Canaan (Genesis 15:18-21). While none of these promises explicitly say that he will be "heir of the world," the idea that all of the families of the earth would be blessed and that Abraham would be the father of many nations shows that Abraham and his family (both spiritual and physical) would come to rule the whole world, an idea that the prophets also predicted (Isaiah 2:1-4; Zechariah 14:16-19).

As we look historically, how has the promise that Abraham and his descendants (both physical and spiritual) would be heirs of the world been fulfilled?

In what ways will God fulfill this promise in the future?

But the key point that Paul is making is that this promise came *before* the law in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. So God's promise to Abraham that he and his descendants would one day rule the world didn't come through the law, it came before the law! In a similar way, the blessings promised to those

who follow Christ aren't earned through our keeping of God's laws. Rather, we receive them by simply believing for salvation. Once again, Paul reminds us that the point of the law was to show sin and reveal God's anger against our sinfulness. The law was never designed to be the channel through which God's blessings will come, but rather to show us that God is angry with sin.

Why did God add the law after the promise? How does making sin more obvious help bring the promise to fulfillment?

In what ways does the law still help people today to realize their need of faith in Jesus?

Abraham inherited the promise through faith (4:17-21)

Finally, Paul concludes by describing the faith of Abraham. Abraham wasn't saved because he believed Jesus would come and die for his sins, but he was counted righteous because of his faith.⁴ What exactly was it that his faith believed? That God would keep his promise to make him a father of many nations, even though he and his wife were too old! Abraham believed that God would do what He said He would do even when from a human standpoint it looked impossible.

In what ways do people have a hard time doubting the promises that God makes today, especially the offer of salvation?

Why do you think God wants the way of salvation to be by faith? What does faith say about God?

Abraham's Example Is Meant for Us (4:22-25)

But what about us? How are we declared righteous before God? How is it that God's promises of blessing are realized in our lives? After discussing the importance of God's promise of future blessings and the fact they rely on faith, Paul returns to his audience. He has made his case that Abraham's righteousness before God and the promises he inherited were not by good works that he had done or by following the law. Rather, he was declared righteous and inherited the promises on the basis of faith. But all of this, Paul tells us, was written down for our benefit.

In what ways does Paul compare the faith of Paul and the faith of believers? How are they similar? In what ways would they be different?

Like David, the wrong things we have done can be freely forgiven us because Jesus died for us. Like Abraham, we can be declared right before God because Jesus was raised for us. Belief in Jesus is the difference between true salvation and something that in many ways mimics salvation, but leaves a person condemned before a wrathful God.

⁴ Some argue that the faith of the patriarchs looks forward to the coming sacrifice just as we look back to it. While this view is attractive, there are several problems with it. 1) It must assume that God told the patriarchs more than we have recorded. While this is possible, it is an argument from silence. 2) When Jesus came, no one was looking for a sacrifice for sin. Even his own disciples didn't seem to understand the importance of what Jesus came to do. 3) Paul here specifically says that Abraham was justified by faith, *when he believed the promise God gave him*. In other words, Paul's understanding of the content of Abraham's faith was not in a coming redeemer, but in the promise that God gave.

Why do you think the wrath of God, described in chapters 1-3, is missing in much of our culture's thinking today?

What difference does it make if we understand God as wrathfully angry against sin?

It's a question we should all ask – do I think I'm right before God because I've done good things and followed the rules, or because of faith in Jesus? Am I expecting that I will receive the blessings of eternal reward because I obey God, or because I have trusted in Christ? Many people think that because they are a part of a church, or because they try to do right (and succeed some of the time), or because our parents were Christians and we've always grown up in Christianity. Those things don't save! Only faith in Jesus and the work that He has done will save us.

Why do some people go to churches like ours all their lives and still think they are right before God because they do good things?

How can we help such people?

How do we make sure that we have not fallen into the same trap?

What role do works play in regard to the blessing of God? How can we avoid falling into the trap of legalism and also avoiding the trap ignoring God's commands?