

Reckoned as Righteous

Lesson for May 12, 2024

Unit III: Standing in the Faith

Adult Topic: For Our Sake

Background Scripture: Romans 4

Printed Text: Romans 4:13-25

Key verse: “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.” (Romans 4:20-21, NIV)

What is justification? It is the declared purpose of God to regard and treat those sinners who believe in Jesus Christ as if they had not sinned, on the ground of the merits of the Savior. It is not mere pardon. Pardon is a free forgiveness of past offenses. It has reference to those sins as forgiven and blotted out. Justification has respect to the law, and to God's future dealings with the sinner. It is an act by which God determines to treat him hereafter as righteous – as if he had not sinned. The basis for this is the merit of the Lord Jesus Christ, merit that we can plead as if it were our own. He has taken our place and died in our stead; He has met the descending stroke of justice, which would have fallen on our own heads if He had not interposed.

Albert Barnes

People want to be rewarded for their good efforts. What successes do we hope to earn from the hard work? Paul told the Roman Christians that the blessing which God gave to Abraham was “reckoned to him as righteousness” and that, on account of Christ, God does the same for us. (*Sunday School Commentary*, 2023-2024, Townsend Press, p. 331)

Key Terms

1. **Heir** (verse 13) – One who receives or is entitled to receive something from a parent or predecessor.
2. **Hope** (verse 18) – To expect with confidence; trust. To desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment.
3. **Promise** (verse 16) – A legally binding declaration that gives the person to whom it is made a right to expect or to claim the performance or forbearance of a specified act.

Lesson Background

Romans 4 focuses on the faith of Abraham. Genesis 15:6 says clearly that Abraham believed God and that faith—his trusting belief in God—was counted to Abraham as righteousness. Abraham was not justified by works. God wasn't paying him back for something. Abraham's was justified as God's gift to him. In the same way, David speaks of those whose sins the Lord does not count against them as being blessed by God. They do not earn forgiveness. God gives it (Romans 4:1–8).

This brings up a possible objection: wasn't Abraham righteous because he obeyed God by being circumcised? That's what many Jewish people believed. Paul says no, God declared Abraham righteous for his faith long before Abraham was circumcised. Obedience comes after faith; in Abraham's case, many years passed between the two events! Circumcision became a sign of Israel's faith in God and seal of the righteousness God had *already declared* for Abraham. In this way, Abraham became a spiritual father to all who come to God by faith, even those who are not circumcised for religious reasons; in this passage, referred to as the Gentiles. Abraham also became a spiritual father, as well as a physical one, to all the believing Jews who would follow the example of his faith in God (Romans 4:9–12).

In today's lesson, God essentially promised Abraham and his offspring "the world," in a sense. Can that promise be claimed by keeping the law? Paul says no.

Lesson in Depth

I. Justified Apart from the Law (Romans 4:13-17)

To this point in Paul's letter to the Roman Church, Paul has stressed faith as the way – the only way – to salvation. To counter any arguments from Jewish Christians in the congregation, Paul used the example of Abraham as one who was made right with God – justified – by faith.

For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law: Paul explains once again that the **promise** that God gave to Abraham to bless Abraham's and his descendants was not conditioned upon his observance of the law of God. Since all God's dealings with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob happened before the giving of the Mosaic Law, we can't say they were based on the law. Instead, they are based on God's declaration of Abraham's righteousness through faith.

In Greek, faith is *pis tis* which means a conviction in the truthfulness of God. This faith - this conviction - is what God recognized when he, "credited his faith to him as righteousness."

For the promise... through the righteousness of faith: The law cannot bring us into the blessings of God's promises. This is not because the law is bad, but because we are unable to keep it.

Because the law brings about wrath: Our inability to keep the law (our **transgression**) means that it becomes essentially a vehicle of God's wrath towards us, especially if we regard it as the principle by which we are justified and relate to God.

Where there is no law there is no transgression: Because "*Transgression* is the right word for overstepping a line, and this for breaking a clearly defined commandment" (Morris). Where there is no line, there is no actual **transgression**.

The root of sin isn't in breaking the law, but in breaking *trust* with God; with denying His loving, caring purpose in every command He gives. Before Adam sinned he broke *trust* with God – therefore God's plan of redemption is centered on a relationship of trusting love – *faith* – instead of law-keeping. When we center our relationship with God on law-keeping instead of trusting love, we go against His whole plan.

It is of faith that it might be according to grace: **Faith** is related to **grace** in the same way *works* is related to *law*. Grace and law are principles, and faith and works are the means by which we pursue those principles for our relationship with God.

It is of faith: Salvation is **of faith** and nothing else. We can only receive salvation by the principle of **grace** through **faith**. **Grace** can't be gained through **works**, whether they be past works, present works, or promised works. This is because by definition grace is given without regard to anything in the one who receives it.

"Grace and faith are congruous, and will draw together in the same chariot, but grace and merit are contrary the one to the other and pull opposite ways, and therefore God has not chosen to yoke them together." (Spurgeon)

So that the promise might be sure to all the seed: The promise can only be sure if it is according to grace. If law is the basis of our salvation, then our salvation depends on our performance in keeping the law – and no one can keep the law good enough to be saved by it. A law-promise of salvation can never be sure.

If the promise "were of the law, it would be unsure and uncertain, because of man's weakness, who is not able to perform it." (Poole)

But also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all: If our relationship with God is according to grace (not circumcision or law-keeping), then that relationship is for those who are of the *faith* of Abraham, even if they are not of his lineage.

A Gentile could say, "I am not a Jew, I am not of the law; but I am of the *faith* of Abraham," and he would be just as saved as a Jewish believer in Jesus would be.

The father of us all: The fulfillment of the promise in Genesis 17:4-5 is found not only in Abraham's descendants through Isaac, but especially in his role as being *the father of us all* who believe – and those believers come from every nation under heaven.

So that he became the father of many nations: Even as it took a supernatural life-giving work to make Abraham the physical father of many nations, it also took a supernatural life-giving work to make him the spiritual father of many nations.

Who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as if they did: These works of God demonstrate His ability to count things that are not (such as our righteousness) as if they were (as in counting us righteous).

If God could call the dead womb of Sarah to life, he can call those who are *dead in trespasses and sins* (Ephesians 2:1) to new life in Jesus.

“I’m greatly comforted when God speaks about me as righteous, justified, glorified, holy, pure, and saintly. God can talk about such things before they exist, because He knows they will exist.” (Smith)

II. Justified by Faith Alone (Romans 4:18-25)

Contrary to hope, in hope believed: This life-giving power was accomplished in Abraham as he believed. The power was evident naturally and spiritually.

Abraham’s example also helps us to understand the nature of faith. The conception of Abraham’s son Isaac was a miracle, but it was not an immaculate conception. Abraham’s faith did not mean that he did nothing and just waited for God to create a child in Sarah’s womb. Abraham and Sarah had marital relations and trusted God for a miraculous result. This shows us that faith does not mean doing *nothing*, but doing *everything* with trust and reliance on God.

“All true believers, like Abraham, obey. Obedience is faith in action. You are to walk in the steps of the faith of father Abraham. His faith did not sit still, it took steps; and you must take these steps also by obeying God because you believe him. That faith which has no works with it is a dead faith, and will justify no one.” (Spurgeon)

Not being weak in faith: Abraham’s faith was strong but it was also **strengthened**. He was **strengthened in faith**.

The idea seems to be that Abraham was **strengthened in his faith**; but Paul could also mean that Abraham was strengthened *by* his faith – certainly both were true.

How we need to be **strengthened in faith**! “Dear brother, little faith will save thee if it be true faith, but there are many reasons why you should seek an increase of it.” (Spurgeon)

He did not consider his own body, already dead: Abraham, in faith, did not look to circumstances (**his own body and the deadness of Sarah’s womb**) but he looked **at the promise of God**.

In Romans 4:19, there is textual uncertainty as to if we should read *he considered his body as good as dead* or if we should read **he did not consider his own body**. Either is possible, though the second seems to be a better choice.

He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief: His faith did not **waiver**; and it gave glory to God. Though it was a huge challenge, Abraham remained steadfast in faith. “When there is no contest, it is true, no one, as I have said, denies that God can do all things; but as soon as anything comes in the way to impede the course of God’s promise, we cast down God’s power from its eminence.” (Calvin)

Being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform: Abraham’s faith came because he had been **fully convinced** of God’s ability to perform what He has promised.

Is your God too small? The God of Abraham was able to perform what He had promised, and Abraham was **fully convinced** of this.

Some people don’t come to Jesus or don’t go further with Him because they are not **fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform**. They think, “It is fine for them but it won’t work for me.” This thinking is a devilish attack on faith, and must be rejected.

Able to perform: This kind of faith sees the work of God done. It sees the work of God done in the *immediate* (Isaac was born in fulfillment of the promise) and in the *eternal* (accounted to him for righteousness).

It was not written for his sake alone: It wasn’t only for Abraham’s benefit that God declared him righteous through faith; he is an example that we are invited to follow – it is **also for us**. Paul’s confidence is glorious: **It shall be imputed to us who believe**; this wasn’t just for Abraham, but for us also.

Who believe in Him who raised up Jesus: When we talk about faith and saving faith in Jesus, it is important to emphasize that we mean believing that His work on the cross (delivered up because of our offenses) and triumph over sin and death (raised because of our justification) is what saves us. There are many false-faiths that can never save, and only faith in what Jesus accomplished on the cross and through the empty tomb can save us.

- Faith in the historical events of the life of Jesus will not save.
- Faith in the beauty of Jesus’ life will not save.
- Faith in the accuracy or goodness of Jesus’ teaching will not save.
- Faith in the deity of Jesus and in His Lordship will not save.
- *Only* faith in what the real Jesus did for us on the cross will save.

Raised because of our justification: The resurrection has an essential place in our redemption because it demonstrates God the Father’s perfect satisfaction with the Son’s work on the cross. It proves that what Jesus did on the cross was in fact a perfect sacrifice made by One who remained perfect, even though bearing the sin of the world.

Delivered up because of our offenses: The ancient Greek word translated **delivered** (*paradidomi*) was used of casting people into prison or delivering them to justice. “Here it speaks of the judicial act of God the Father delivering God the Son to the justice that required the payment of the penalty for human sin.” (Wuest)
“Jesus’ resurrection always includes his sacrificial death but it brings out the all-sufficiency of his death. If death had held him, he would have failed; since he was raised from death, his sacrifice sufficed, God set his seal upon it by raising him up.” (Lenski)

“Christ did meritoriously work our justification and salvation by his death and passion, but the efficacy and perfection thereof with respect to us depend on his resurrection... This one verse is an abridgement of the whole gospel.” (Poole)

In this chapter, Paul clearly demonstrated that in no way does the Old Testament contradict the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. Instead the gospel is the *fulfillment* of the Old Testament, and Abraham – justified through faith – is our pattern.

Lesson Summary

This week’s lesson highlights the centrality of faith in the Christian life and the gracious nature of God’s salvation, which is available to all who believe. Some key lessons that we can learn from this passage are:

1. **Faith as the Path to Righteousness:** The passage emphasizes that Abraham was justified not by his works but by his faith. This teaches us that our relationship with God is not based on our own merit or deeds, but on faith in Him.
2. **Promise vs. Law:** Paul contrasts the promise given to Abraham with the law given to Moses. The promise, based on faith, shows God’s grace and is available to all, while the law brings knowledge of sin and requires perfect obedience.
3. **Imputed Righteousness:** Paul explains that righteousness is imputed or credited to us through faith, just as it was to Abraham. This means that God counts us as righteous based on our faith in Him, not our own righteousness.
4. **Universal Message:** The promise to Abraham was not just for him or his descendants but for all who share his faith. This shows that salvation through faith is available to all, regardless of nationality or background.
5. **Strengthening of Faith:** Abraham’s faith was strengthened as he believed in God’s promise, even when circumstances seemed impossible. This teaches us the importance of trusting in God’s promises and remaining steadfast in faith.