

LESSON SIX

ROMANS 4:1-25

Abraham's Righteousness

No one may boast of his favor with God, for both Jew and Gentile are declared righteous not because of obedience to God's Law but because of faith in Jesus' death (3:27). This was a hard idea for Jews to grasp. What about Abraham, the father of the nation, whom the Jews considered the most obedient man there ever was? Surely he had reason to boast of God's approval! Paul knew if he could prove that Abraham had no reason to boast, then the matter was settled for any Jew.

Read 4:1-25 for its overall message. Ask God to show you what it means to be accepted totally by grace, regardless of your works.

Works or faith? (4:1-8)

Abraham believed God (4:3). See the box, "Abraham's Faith" on page 72.

Credited (4:3,4,5,6,9,10,11,22,23,24) and **count** (4:8). "Counted," "reckoned," and "imputed" in KJV. This word from the marketplace means "to put to someone's account." Both gifts and wages are credited to a person's account (4:4).

But not before God (4:2). Or, "But this is not how God sees him."¹ That is, *if* Abraham was justified by works, *then* he could boast, but in God's eyes Abraham was not justified by works.

For Thought and Discussion: Are you ever tempted to think of faith as a virtue that earns God's favor? Why is this wrong?

For Thought and Discussion: a. How does a wicked person become guiltless before God (4:5)?
b. What implications does this have for our lives?

For Thought and Discussion: Why does trusting God to justify the ungodly glorify Him more than trying to earn His acceptance?

For Thought and Discussion: a. Does trusting God to justify us allow us to persist in willful sin? Why or why not? (Paul discusses this in chapter 6.)

b. Have you ever excused a sin by telling yourself that God would forgive you? If so, how can you avoid doing this again?

Optional Application: Meditate on God's character in 4:5 and your status in 4:7-8. Examine your life for ways in which you are still acting as though you have to earn God's love. Thank Him for His generous forgiveness.

1. Why was Abraham's faith not a work that earned the wage of righteousness? (Consider: According to Romans 4:4-5, what was Abraham believing about God?)

2. In Psalm 32:1-2, David describes what God does when He credits righteousness to a person. How does David describe what God does (Romans 4:6-8)?

Circumcision or uncircumcision?

(4:9-12)

Not after, but before (Romans 4:10). God pronounced Abraham righteous (Genesis 15:6) some fourteen years before he was circumcised (Genesis 17:23-24).

3. Remember the Jews' beliefs about circumcision (page 48). Why was it important that God declared Abraham righteous before he was circumcised (Romans 4:9-11)?

4. Circumcision was a sign (pointer) and seal (outward ratification and guarantee) of the righteousness Abraham had by faith (4:11). What are the signs and seals of a Christian's righteousness by faith? (*Optional:* See John 13:35; Acts 2:41, 8:12, 10:47; Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30; 1 Peter 3:21.)

5. Abraham is the physical forefather of all who are physically Jews (4:1). Of whom is he the spiritual forefather?

4:11 _____

4:12 _____

Law or faith? (4:13-16)

Through law (4:13). On the basis of fully obeying God's Law in the future.

Live by law (4:14). Base their claim to inheritance on fully obeying the Law.

6. a. On what basis did Abraham receive the promise of inheriting the world? What requirements, if any, would he and his descendants have to fulfill (4:13)?

For Further Study:

a. How does James 2:14-26 (especially 2:24) complement Romans 4:1-8?

b. For the same balance, compare Ephesians 2:8-9 to Ephesians 2:10, or Genesis 15:6 to Genesis 22.

For Further Study:
How does law bring wrath (4:15)? Paul explains in 7:7-11.

For Thought and Discussion: Does it seem fair that even sinners can inherit God's promises if they put faith in God? Why or why not?

For Thought and Discussion: How are justification by faith and justification by grace related (3:24-25, 4:16)?

b. How does this apply to you this week?

7. God's promise is worthless if the only people who can inherit it are those who live up to it by perfect obedience (4:14-15). Why would this requirement make the promise worthless?

Sight or faith? (4:17-25)

Who gives life to the dead (4:17). Abraham believed that God could bring life from Sarah's dead womb (Romans 4:19) and that if he sacrificed his son Isaac in obedience to God, then God would raise Isaac from the dead to fulfill His promise of descendants through Isaac (Genesis 22).

Calls things that are not (Romans 4:17). Abraham knew that God created the world from nothing and could create a son and a myriad of nations from what looked like nothing.

8. What facts might have convinced Abraham that God's promise of a son was impossible (4:19)?

9. However, Abraham believed two things about God that convinced him that God could keep His promise (4:17).

a. In what ways does God give "life to the dead" (4:17)? (Optional: See Romans 4:24-25, 8:13; Luke 9:23-24; 1 Corinthians 15:20-22; 2 Corinthians 4:11-12, 16-18; Ephesians 2:4-5.)

b. How does God call "things that are not as though they were" (4:17)? (Optional: See Romans 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; 2 Corinthians 5:1, 6-10; Hebrews 10:35-11:2; 1 John 3:2-3.)

Delivered . . . sins . . . raised . . . justification (4:25). "For" here means "on account of." Jesus was delivered to death in order to atone for our sins, and He was raised to guarantee our justification and encourage us to put faith in that jus-

For Thought and Discussion: How was Abraham able to resist the temptation to doubt God's promise (4:20)? What lesson does this offer us?

Optional Application: How can you give "glory to God" in your current circumstances as Abraham did (4:20)?

Optional Application: Does Romans 4:17 motivate you to trust God to do anything specific in your life? If so, what are you trusting Him to do? Tell Him about your hopes.

Optional Application: Meditate on 4:25 and its significance for you. Thank God for delivering over and raising Jesus.

tification. Of course, Paul doesn't mean that Christ's death had nothing to do with justification, nor that His resurrection had nothing to do with atonement.²

Your response

10. How has Abraham's example in 4:1-25 helped you to understand righteousness by grace through faith? Summarize what Paul says in this chapter.

11. What insight from 4:1-25 seems most relevant to you?

12. How can you put this insight into practice or let it affect your life this week?

13. List any questions you have about 4:1-25.

For the group

Accountability. At your last few meetings, you have each named certain areas of your lives on which you wanted to concentrate for growth. You planned to pray for each other, think about Paul's words during the week, look for chances to act obediently, consistently confess and seek forgiveness, and so on. At the beginning of this meeting, you might each report briefly on how well you followed through on your commitments, and what happened.

For example, one person may have gotten stuck scheduling time to pray, another may have had trouble remembering Paul's words during the day, and another may have noticed for the first time how self-righteous he really is. This reporting back will update you on how to pray for each other and will let you share ideas for how to schedule prayer, remember God's Word during the day, and so on.

Warm-up. Ask, "What chance have you had this week to act on faith in one of God's promises?" Even if most group members can't think of answers right away, this question will start them thinking about how 4:1-25 applies to them.

Questions. Use the subtitles in this lesson to shape your discussion. They should help the group trace Paul's train of thought. For example:

According to 4:1-8, how do we know that Abraham was justified by faith, not works?

Why is it important that Abraham was declared righteous before being circumcised (4:9-12)?

Why is faith a better basis for God's promises than law (4:13-16)?

How did Abraham live by faith rather than sight (4:17-25)?

For Further Study: Add chapter 4 to your outline.

At each stage, discuss how you can follow Abraham's example. Verses 17-25, in particular, are a challenge to act in faith. Encourage group members to share how they plan to apply Abraham's example.

Restating. In even the best study guide, a question is occasionally unclear. Also, groups often find it helpful and more interesting when leaders rephrase the questions instead of just repeating them. So, when you want to restate a question, keep these two sets of categories in mind: 1) the procedure of observe-interpret-apply; and 2) the topics of "Who is God?" "Who am I?" and "What should I do?"

For example, you can restate an observation question like this: "What does this verse (or paragraph) say about God or Christ (His character, acts, etc.?)" Or, "What does this verse (or paragraph) say about man's unredeemed nature or his nature/identity in Christ?" Or, "What does this paragraph say we should think or do because we are in Christ?"

For interpretation questions, you can ask, "What does the phrase: ' . . . ' mean?" Or, "What is Paul trying to tell us about God (or Christ, or man, or what we should do)?"

For applications, try asking, "How does this passage apply to you?" Or, "What implications does this passage have for your life?" Or, "What specific steps can you take to act on this teaching?"

Worship. Thank God for the example of Abraham's faith. Thank Him for not demanding faith as a work, but only as simple trust. Thank Him for His promises. Praise Him for being "the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."

Abraham's Faith

The Jews of Paul's day held that Abraham was justified by his deeds, his sinlessness, and they used Genesis 15:6 as the supreme proof of this fact. According to Rabbi Shemaiah (about 50 BC), God had said, "The faith with which their father Abraham believed in me merits that I should divide the sea for them, as it is written: 'And he believed in the LORD, and he counted it to him

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for righteousness."³ The same work later said, "Our father Abraham became the heir of this and of the coming world simply by the merit of the faith with which he believed in the LORD, as it is written: 'He believed in the LORD. . . .'"⁴

In short, the Jews regarded Abraham's faith as the greatest of his many meritorious works. By contrast, Paul insisted that 1) Abraham was not sinless, and 2) Abraham's faith did not earn righteousness but moved God to gift him with righteousness.

God promised that Abraham would have a son and a multitude of descendants from his own body (Genesis 15:1-5), and Abraham believed Him (Genesis 15:6). That trust in God's willingness and ability to keep His promises moved God to treat Abraham as a loyal subject, even though Abraham fell far short of sinlessness. Abraham did many acts of obedience that reflected his faith; for instance, he proceeded to sacrifice his son until God allowed him to stop (Genesis 22). However, Abraham also did many acts of faithlessness that God forgave; for example, he twice lied about his wife and risked losing her (Genesis 12:10-20, 20:1-18). Those occasional lapses did not forfeit Abraham's righteousness because perfect performance had not earned that righteousness.

1. Crandall, page 84.
2. Murray, pages 154-157; Bruce, *Romans*, page 119; Cranfield, page 97.
3. *Mekilta* on Exodus 14:15, quoted in Cranfield, pages 84-85.
4. *Mekilta* on Exodus 14:31, quoted in Cranfield, page 85.