



Adult Bible Study Lesson Summary for July 18, 2021

Released on Monday, July 12, 2021

"The Faith of Abraham"

Lesson Text: Romans 4:1-12

Background Scripture: Romans 4

Devotional Reading: Genesis 15:1-6

Romans 4:1-12 (KJV)

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.

LESSON AIMS

Learning Fact: To summarize the nature of Abraham's righteousness.

Biblical Principle: To show how faith in God leads to justification by God.

Daily Application: To wait on God and trust Him to fulfil His promises.

INTRODUCTION

The Progenitor of the Printing Press

In the mid-1400s, a German entrepreneur introduced a process that many identify as the beginning of the modern era. Johannes Gutenberg combined ideas from metallurgy, book production, agricultural methods, and other areas to produce the first European “movable-type” printing press. The crown jewel of his career was the production in 1455 of 180 deluxe copies of the Latin translation of the Bible.

This edition is now known as the Gutenberg Bible, with fewer than 50 known copies surviving. Perhaps the finest example is on display in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Gutenberg’s printing press allowed for the mass production of books, therefore increasing the desirability of literacy and knowledge. Our digital age is far removed from Gutenberg’s press in Mainz, but the precedent he set has earned him the title of Father of Printing, and his influence is still felt today.

The internet has many “Father of the ...” and “Mother of the ...” lists. The apostle Paul has one of his own.

LESSON CONTEXT

During Paul’s ministry, a key issue concerned the role of the Jewish law for Christians who were not of Jewish descent. At the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the famous Jerusalem Council had already recognized that Gentiles would be welcomed into the church without being required to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:7–11, 19–21, 28, 29). This included forgoing circumcision, which symbolized the entire law for Jews (see Romans 4:9).

Circumcision was perhaps the most honored of all Jewish traditions. The rite began with Abraham, the forefather of the entire nation of Israel (see Romans 4:1). Jewish men had proudly borne the mark of circumcision for hundreds of years, a physical sign of their separation from Gentiles. The traditional adversaries of Israel were called uncircumcised, an epithet spit out in scorn (example: Jeremiah 9:26; see Romans 4:9). Any foreigner who wanted to be accepted into Israel had to be circumcised (Exodus 12:48). To be an uncircumcised Jewish man was to be expelled from Israel and thus *not* part of the nation (Genesis 17:14).

Gentiles did not welcome the idea of circumcision as a condition for worshipping God. The physical act of circumcision was culturally repugnant and physically painful. In the Roman world, this hesitation resulted in Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism to be identified as “devout” (Acts 17:4, 17) in contrast with a “proselyte” (Matthew 23:15), who converted fully.

The “devout” chose to honor the Lord. However, they were excluded from full participation in the temple or synagogues because the men in these families had not undergone circumcision. Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, during which time the Holy Spirit came to a group of Gentiles (Acts 10:44–48), was the beginning of a new understanding about what would and would not be required in the church (11:15–18).

In part, the discussion of what Jewish customs to retain in the church—and require of Gentiles—was a discussion about the relationship between faith and works. Though these two concepts can be held in tension, most Christians understand that works flow out of faith (James 2:14–26). We are “saved through faith, ... not of works” (Ephesians 2:8, 9). The work that we do for Christ is faith manifesting itself in our lives (2:10); it is not an attempt

to save ourselves. Paul's discussion of Abraham considered in our lesson text is an example of this fact.

Paul ended Romans 3 with a crescendo that emphasized that people can be pronounced righteous only through faith (Romans 3:30). But this raises an important question: What about the ancient and hallowed Jewish law, the law that Moses received from God himself?

Ancestor of Israel: Romans 4:1-3

1. Who was Paul talking to when he said "we" and "our" (Romans 4:1)?

Paul's use of the possessive pronoun "our" and the qualifying phrase "as pertaining to the flesh" indicates that he is identifying himself with his people, the Jews, who traced their ancestry to the great patriarch Abraham, in whom the Jews gloried as their most renowned forefather. Paul's strategy took his line of argumentation to a time even before Israel was a nation. The question is, was Abraham saved by his acts of good work and obedience or was he saved by the faith of which Paul spoke in the preceding chapter?

2. How was Abraham justified before God? (Romans 4:2)

In Romans 4:2, Paul establishes the source of Abraham's justification. To be *justified* is to be counted or considered righteous. Did *Abraham* earn justification through his acts of obedience, his *works*?

If works were the ground of Abraham's justification, he would have matter for boasting; but as it is perfectly certain that he had none in the sight of God. (v. 2). No amount of righteous deeds will position a person correctly *before God*, for all men and women have sinned (Romans 3:23).

Paul's original readers knew that Abraham did not always act in a righteous, faithful way. His deceptions concerning the status of Sarah as his sister rather than his wife nearly caused her to be involved in adultery (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18). And though his actions toward Hagar were sadly typical for his day, the way he treated his concubine and son after the birth of Isaac left much to be desired (21:8-21). If Abraham had been *justified by his good works*, then he would have had reason to *glory* in himself. But that was not the case.

Justification is an act, not a process. There are no degrees of justification; each believer has the same right standing before God. Also justification is something that God does, not man... Most important, justification does not mean that God makes us righteous, but that He declares us righteousness...and nobody can change this record.

What Do You Think?

What personal guardrails can you erect to ensure that you keep pride in its proper place and properly expressed?

Digging Deeper

How would you rank-order these passages in terms of relevance to that question: Proverbs 16:18; 2 Corinthians 10:7-18; Ephesians 2:8-9; James 4:16; 1 John 2:16? Why?

3. What gave Abraham the status of a righteous person before our holy God? (Romans 4:3)

Paul's statement in Romans 4:3 is a near quote of Genesis 15:6. In that context, Abraham had been lamenting that he had no male heir to carry forward his name and legacy. In a visionary experience, the Lord compelled Abraham to go outside on a clear night to view the

uncountable number of stars in the sky. God promised Abraham that the number of his descendants would be like this ocean of stars (Gen. 15:5). So, Abraham had a choice to make: (1) he could trust that God would keep His promise and grant him an heir or (2) he could reject this as impossible.

Rather than despair or reject the Lord, *Abraham believed God*. He chose to believe that God was capable of keeping His promise and would be faithful to do so. He trusted that God had a plan for him. God then "counted" Abraham's faith as *righteousness* (Rom. 4:3).

The result for generations to come was that Abraham stood as the father of Israel first, but also of all believers who trust God.

Receiving Righteousness: Romans 4:4-8

4. Why can't righteousness be earned? (Romans 4:4, 5)

Workers are not paid because of *grace* but because they have earned their wages. The *debt* incurred by their employer is thereby discharged.

This principle is now further explained. Paul reasons that justification by works rests on the principle that men may earn this salvation by doing good. If this principle were true, good men would be saved by their good works and salvation would not be a gift at all. But justification by faith rests on the principle that God imputed righteousness to the ungodly as a free gift. Salvation is not, therefore, earned by the sinner but is freely given to a person when he or she puts their faith in the blood of Jesus Christ.

To be justified by God can never be the result of our works, for we have too many debits in the form of sins. If we really earned what we deserve based on our works, we would all remain dead in sins (Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 2:13, 14) since "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The person who thinks a winning strategy before the throne of final judgment will be to present a list of righteous deeds will be sorely disappointed. No one can be declared righteous through works of the law (Romans 3:20); rather, the law was set to make us conscious of our sin.

5. Why did Paul make reference to David concerning the essence of justification? (Romans 4:6-8)

Paul has made a case for Abraham's justification apart from works; now he strengthens that case with another revered Jewish figure of the Old Testament, David. David corroborated what is said about Abraham when he wrote of his experience of being forgiven by God, quoted in the verses before us (see vs. 7, 8; Psalm 32:1, 2), further illustrating salvation apart from works. David gives witness that the same principle of justification was operative even for those living under the Mosaic law.

Perhaps even more than Abraham's sins, David's sins are remembered to this day. He committed adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). The fallout from those sins dogged David's personal life (example: 12:14-18).

But David eventually came to know the blessing of forgiven sin (2 Samuel 12:13), the essence of justification. David understood the grace of God as powerful to overcome the guilt of sins. That king's repentance and faithfulness, even when suffering the consequences of his sins, are a great part of why David is called "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

This is a great passage on confession of sin, repentance, and received forgiveness. In it, David exhorted others to realize that happiness is found in God's forgiveness (32:3-5, 11). John wrote about this as well: "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9; compare Psalm 51).

Father of the Faithful: Romans 4:9-12

6. How did Paul explain that outward obedience to God's command of circumcision does not make one righteous? (Romans 4:9-12)

Paul has well argued that justification is by faith alone. He has illustrated, by the lives of Abraham and David, that God has never worked on a principle of justification by works. It is difficult for the Jews, the sons of Abraham, to accept that they may be justified exactly the same way as the heathen Gentiles. Thus, these verses introduced another potential argument against justification by faith.

It is true that both pre-law Abraham (over 100 years before Moses) and under-law David received righteousness. But, so the Jew would argue both of them were also circumcised. Since circumcision is the sign of the covenant between God and His chosen people (Genesis 17:9-14), is it not possible that this was the ground for their justification? Hence the question in our lesson text: "Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also?"

Paul answers, "faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness." This immediately prompts the question as to the timing of the reckoning of righteousness. The answer is clear. Faith was reckoned (credited) to Abraham while he was yet uncircumcised. These are the facts. (1) Genesis 15:6 records the event of Abraham receiving righteousness from God. (2) Sometime after that, Abraham had a son by Hagar when he was 86 years old (Genesis 16:16). (3) At least one year had to elapse between the two events making Abraham 85 years old when righteousness was imputed to him. (4) Ishmael was 13 years old when both he and Abraham (age 99) were circumcised (Genesis 17:25, 26). (5) Therefore, Abraham had righteousness imputed to him at least 14 years before he was circumcised. Paul concludes that circumcision had nothing whatever to do with the imputation of righteousness to Abraham.

This fact was important in affirming that circumcision was not necessary for the faith of Gentiles to be valid in following Christ.

This does not mean that circumcision was unimportant. Abraham received *the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith* (Rom. 4:11). Circumcision did not bring righteousness, but was a visible sign to Abraham's descendants of the righteousness that was imputed to him by faith. Also, circumcision was God's seal of righteousness. Once righteousness has been imputed to the individual it is sealed forever. This is also true of Christian baptism. It does not bring about salvation but is an outward sign declaring salvation and is God's seal of approval on the finished work of Christ in behalf of the believer.

Because Abraham was counted as righteous before circumcision, Paul argued that that patriarch could therefore be the father of any righteous person, regardless of circumcision, if they *walk in the steps of faith like Abraham*.

When it came time for Abraham's greatest test of all—the potential sacrifice of Isaac—he chose obedience that was grounded in faith (Genesis 22:1-14). Abraham believed that even if he sacrificed Isaac, his faithful Lord would keep His promise and raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19). Our hope lies not in righteous deeds but in faith leading to justification by God.

What Do You Think?

What's the single most important thing you can do this week to walk in Abraham's footsteps?

Digging Deeper

What sense of urgency will you have in doing so, given that Abraham is mentioned more than 70 times in the New Testament?

CONCLUSION

Faith and Work

How far do you allow your faith to take you? Do your actions show that your trust in God can overcome doubts and allow you to be obedient to Him? Our faith leads us to entrust our children to God, no matter the circumstances. It guides us to worship God, not money, and to act according to that sole allegiance. Faith requires us to live every day in trust of God and His plan. So, again, how far do you allow your faith to take you?

What Do You Think?

Which concept in the current lesson do you see as most important for undergirding how you should change a thought, speech, or action? Why?

Digging Deeper

What specific, time-bound steps can you take to bring about that change?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, may we live daily as people whose faith results in unconditional trust in You! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The Lord remains as the Father of the faithful!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Peace with God" and explains the result of being justified by faith. Study Romans 5:1-11.

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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