

Reckoned as Righteous

Lesson Scripture: Romans 4

Focus Scripture: Romans 4:13-25

Key Verses: (Abraham) grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Romans 4:20-21

ROMANS 4:13-25 (NRSV UE)

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.

16 For this reason the promise depends on faith, in order that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (who is the father of all of us,

17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"), in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So shall your descendants be."

19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,

21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

ROMANS 4:13-25 (KJV)

13 For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

14 For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect:

15 Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.

16 Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,

17 (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.

18 Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be.

19 And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb:

20 He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God;

21 And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.

22 And therefore it was imputed to him for

22 Therefore “it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

23 Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone

24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,

25 who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

righteousness.

23 Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him;

24 But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead;

25 Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.

KEY TERMS

- **Ascribe / Ascribing** – Giving credit for or assume (of a character trait).
- **Imprudence** – Reckless foolishness or carelessness.
- **Justification** – Considered right with or pleasing to God (saved, forgiven).
- **Scintillating** – Very exciting; stirring thrills in the mind and body.
- **Hermeneutics** – The theory and practice of interpreting scripture texts.
- **Hedonistic** – The practice of heathens; grossly, ungodly self-indulgence.

“sometimes when we try to reproduce the results of our heroes, in error we focus on the effects rather than what produced the amazing results.”

INTRODUCTION

This lesson continues the discussion of salvation (justification) through faith and highlights the best Jewish example of how a person gets God’s nod of approval purely by belief. The review of Abraham’s actions and faith is important because it focuses on the interplay between belief and actions, and makes clear which is the cause, and which is the effect.

This is important because sometimes when we try to reproduce the results of our heroes, in error we focus on the effects rather than what produced the amazing results. Apparently, the Jews were making this mistake. They attributed Abraham’s favor

with God to his actions (works) rather than the motivation behind the actions, his belief in God. This is a mistake we must avoid. Acts of piety may impress other people, but do not justify us before God. Our justification, in God's eyes, still comes from our belief in God. And the acts of piety are only important if they show our level of belief in God. It is crucial that we get the order right.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Part of the magnificence of this text is that it gives all the key elements of an active faith. As noted elsewhere, faith is not an exercise where a person decides on an outcome for an event and then forces God to produce that outcome. That is not faith but impudence.



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Faith starts with a word, promise, or belief surrounding the character of God. In Abraham's case, he rooted his faith in the promise God gave him in Genesis 12:1-3, that he would become the father of many nations. It took faith to believe that promise, given the realities of the

lives of Abraham and his wife at the time of the promise.

To appreciate some of the tensions in the text, and how Paul was addressing these, keep before you that Paul was writing to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles. To stay relevant to both groups, he had to define God's people in terms that would give each group an interest in what he was proposing. He knew he was swimming against the Jewish traditions,

which defined God's people narrowly as the Jews who kept the law of Moses. That definition emphasized the outward signs of diet, dress, circumcision, and related religious rituals. Paul had to expand this narrow Jewish outlook to cover the Gentiles who were outside that tradition.

That approach brought the practice of circumcising into focus, as the Jews saw this practice as one of the principal badges of honor of God's people. This was one of the defining red lines in this matter. Paul had to cross it with great skill, and so must we.

We must distinguish between faith and the signs or evidence of faith. Paul was clear that practices like circumcision did not make a person right with God. It was not the source of justification with God, but rather a result or evidence of a person's rightness with God. Circumcision was a sign that Abraham was right with God, but it was not the sign that made him right with God. Paul's entire argument rested on this distinction between the cause and the effect of justification.

This argument is still relevant to us today. Our religious rituals do not make us right with God. Rather, we perform the rituals because we believe in God and want to show that belief in ways we consider acceptable to God.

Therefore, we cannot conclude that we are right with God because we observe certain rituals. That position says that people who do not follow our practices are not right with God or "lost." Friends, it is not the rituals that make us right with God. Jesus went to great lengths to make this point in Luke 18 (note Luke 18:14).

This point reoccurs in places like Hebrews 11:8-18. Abraham grounded his faith in the existence and character of God, not on his ability or resources to please God by performing certain duties. We must try hard not to make the same error the Jews had made for centuries on this matter. Only an active belief in God, through faith in Christ, makes us right with God. That belief will work itself out in

external signs, but the signs are not the source of our justification with God. The Jews were riding the horse and cart backwards with the cart pulling the horse. We cannot afford to do the same today.

In verses 13-17 Paul reinforced a point he made before in chapter 3, which we addressed

in a previous lesson. The law could never justify anyone before God, as that was never the purpose or intent of the law. The law only identified sin. Justification of sinners always flows out of the sinners' faith in the existence and character of God. This is how it was in Abraham's day, and it remains so today.



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Finally, this text is one of the most scintillating, uplifting, and sustaining declarations on faith you will find in any scripture anywhere. The power in this verse (Romans 4:18) is best expressed in the original KJV version. It states, Abraham, “Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, so shall thy seed be.” To analyze this properly, you need one of two things. Either you have two doctorates in hermeneutics from two A-rated seminaries, or a simple enduring appreciation for the beauty of scripture.

The verse says God made Abraham a promise, which by all appearances and circumstances was impossible to fulfill. Yet Abraham, when he had nothing to hang his hope on, still held on to the hope that God would make the impossible promise come true. When everything and everyone around him said it was crazy to believe that God could make the impossible happen, Abraham still believed God would. Yes, we heard you

and you are correct! Faith is believing God can and will deliver, when all the circumstances, all the people around you, and even your rational mind shout that it cannot happen. Do you have faith?

SANKOFA

As noted in the case with Stephen in Acts 7, while faith does not guarantee a particular outcome, it keeps people

running forward towards amazing outcomes. A memorable case in point is the achievements of Jesse Owens (James Cleveland Owens). This “Buckeye Bullet” won four gold medals and set two world records at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany, in a time when black athletes were not expected to excel.

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Owens’ race of faith started as a child when he had to outrun sickness and battles with chronic bronchial congestion and pneumonia. Owen kept living. Like many of the boys of that era, he had to work to help the family put meager food on the table. So, he also had to outrun working in the cotton fields. In 1935,

one year before the Olympics, Owens had to run past a severe tailbone injury. He did and tied a record at the Big Ten Championships.

But Owen's opponents were not only the athletes he competed against on the athletics field. He was running against a super monster of racial discrimination. Historical reports say Hitler, the German leader, was so infuriated by Owens' victories that he stormed out of the games. But Owen kept running. He ran home to America, where people downplayed his world-stopping success. He did not get the customary congratulations and honor from the president. But Owens kept running. It took from 1936 to 1975 for Owens to get the proper recognition he deserved. Faith keeps us running through life's challenges and biases.

Today, Jesse Owens is a name that still inspires athletes around the world. Just as Jews saw Abraham as the father of Faith in

Jewish history, Owen is the father of black world-class athletes around the world. Even today, sportswriters connect the success stories of champions like Usain Bolt and Justin Gatlin to the momentous success of Jesse Owens, the athlete who could not be stopped on or off the sports field. That is the momentum that

strong faith produces in people.

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CASE STUDY

There is a school of thinking that explains faith in terms of a person's "Obedience and Radical Response" to God. Some commentators attribute this approach to the work of theologians, like Karl Barth (1886-1968). In terms of Abraham's faith, these theologians noted that it was much more than a mental

assent or belief but involved a ready obedience and radical response to God's callings.

Let us look at this. Abraham at the call of God uprooted his life and moved from his familiar homeland to an unknown,

uncertain place. Abraham moved at the command of God, not knowing exactly where he was going. Think about this calmly.

When assigned mission duties, even as believers, we want full details before we would even consider the assignments. We must know exactly where we are going, what the place is like, what accommodation is available, what the people are like, and how long we will be there. Contrast that with Abraham's response to God. All Abraham knew was that God, at some time in the future, would show him where he was going. Yet, in pure obedience, he obeyed, packed his


stuff, got his family, and headed out to nowhere. Is that radical or not?

And Abraham did it again when God asked him to sacrifice his son Issac. To get the magnitude of this obedience, consider that human sacrifice was not a part of the Jewish religious life. This act would have been an extraordinary hedonistic act. Further, Isaac was the

son through whom God's promise was to be fulfilled. And there was no backup son. What utter madness! Yet Abraham obeyed!

Those two events are just samples of the radical responses Abraham showed God. The Lord may not ask us for such responses: crazy responses that shake our entire world. Yet when we are

considering our own responses to God, let Abraham's responses be our example of the faith responses that please God. Is this exciting? Oh yes, it is! We can be justified in God's eyes in the same way Abraham was justified by God.



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LIFE APPLICATION

In normal conversation, we have no problem in ascribing to God the general power to do anything. Our challenge comes in believing that God will do the specific things we desire. Consider this and reflect on how you can know that God will do for you the specific things you desire. In doing this reflection, consider your thoughts on your standing in the sight of God, your motives for wanting the

specified thing, and what input God may require from you. Also note, Abraham received from God not because of his begging skills but because of his capacity to obey God. Consider this in relation to your prayer requests. How obedient are you in relation to the revealed commands of God?

Review Abraham's walk of faith in Genesis and underline both the high negative points and the high positive points. Do a similar review of your own faith walk from the time you accepted Christ as Lord and Savior to your position today in the body of Christ. Do you see a similar pattern of high negative points and high positive points? What do these patterns (Abraham's and yours) say to you? This can

be a very maturing exercise when we approach it with a reasonable degree of honesty and maturity. If you find yourself condemning yourself harshly, you are most likely not doing the exercise with the right mindset.

Sometimes we show a tendency which holds people to a higher standard of faith

than what we ourselves practice. This usually comes out when we see or hear about a brother or sister who fell in their walk along the road of faith. We can easily say what the person should have done to avoid the fall, and the associated pain and disgrace. Here is a little something that will add years of maturity to your walk of faith.

The next time you learn of the fall (into sinful behavior) of anyone (friend or foe), consider yourself in the identical situation and what resources (internal strength) you would use to avoid a similar fall.

(into sinful behavior) of anyone (friend or foe), consider yourself in the identical situation and what resources (internal strength) you would use to avoid a similar fall. When done properly, this consideration helps us to take an inventory of our spiritual resources. Respect that apart from Christ, no one has a perfect walk of

faith. Despite all we have noted about Abraham, the birth of Ishmael showed his walk of faith had stumbles.

Abraham is a useful role model. About that position, we have no doubt. But we do not have direct access to Abraham today. Thankfully, we do have access to people who have kept their walk of

faith intact despite walking through some violent storms. It can be maturing to discuss with such people how they kept their faith intact during the storms and challenges of life.

In any such discussion, please do not try to push the people beyond where they may want to go. Kindly accept that what a person shares with you depends on the level of their relations with you, and their subjective assessment of the level of trust they can place in you. Also consider that a person may appear whole on the outside, and still be processing an event or healing from it. Wisdom in these discussions is always the principal thing.

QUESTIONS

1. Looking back over your life, what personal action can you share that showed your trust in God?
2. What assurances would you need from God to go on a mission where you knew there was a risk of failure?
3. To you, what is a modern equivalent of God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn: "I Trust in God," *AMEC Hymnal* #453

Closing Prayer: Patient Lord, help me when I am slow in responding to your words or promises. In those times, remind me of your faithfulness, unlimited power, and limitless resources to see me through any ordeal you call me to. I accept that the way to your favor is faith in your grace. Lord, I thank you for keeping me. In Jesus' name! Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

May 13-May 19

Monday	Isaiah 26:1-11 (Trusting in God Brings Perfect Peace)
Tuesday	Isaiah 40:1-11 (The Penalty Has Been Paid)
Wednesday	Acts 2:1-4, 14, 16-24, 36 (God's Spirit Poured Upon All Flesh)
Thursday	Acts 2:37-47 (The Firstfruits of Reconciliation)
Friday	Genesis 33:1-15 (Brothers at Long Last Reconcile)
Saturday	Psalms 29 (May God Bless Us with Peace)
Sunday	Romans 5:1-11 (Peace with God through Jesus Christ)