

May 12 Lesson 11 (NIV)

Counted as Righteous

Devotional Reading: Genesis 15:1–6

Background Scripture: Romans 4

Romans 4:13–25

¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. ²⁰ 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." ²³ The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Key Text

He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.—Romans 4:20–21

Examining Our Faith

Unit III: Standing in the Faith

Lessons 10–13

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How to Say It

Abraham *Ay-bruh-ham*.

Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Dee-truck Bahn-hahf-ur*.

Isaac *Eye-zuk*.

Moses *Mo-zes* or *Mo-zez*.

Torah *Tor-uh*.

Introduction

A. “The Primitive”

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s resistance to Nazi rule cost him his life in 1945. While directing an illegal seminary, Bonhoeffer wrote to his brother-in-law about his practice of daily Bible reading. He found that practice drew him back to the basics, or what he called “the primitive.” “In matters of faith,” he said, “we are always consistently primitive.” He meant that

however elaborate our ideas or practices may be, we must always come back to our starting point: a fundamental attitude of trust in God's mercy. Our text today focuses on this primitive foundation.

B. Lesson Context

Romans 4 is part of Paul's overall argument supporting his statement in Romans 1:16–17:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Romans 1–3 explores God's primary challenge in keeping the ancient promises, namely, the profound sinfulness of all human beings (3:23).

Chapter 4 begins the discussion of the remedy to universal sin. Far from facing a hopeless situation, humans have a model available to them of how to approach God. That model is the life of Abraham. When God promised that he would bless the world through Abraham, Abraham chose to respond in faith (Genesis 15:6; quoted in Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). Paul's readers, especially those of Jewish heritage, would have agreed that Abraham's legacy was important and valuable. The question in dispute is precisely what that legacy is. Paul argues that Abraham had a relationship with God because he placed his faith in God and trusted God's promises. Nothing else. In the New Testament, faith equals trust in God as the one who has promised to bless humanity. Jesus modeled that trust by submitting to his sacrificial death on a cross, being confident that God would work for good through Jesus' shame and suffering. That trust is the basis for any relationship with the same merciful God.

I. True Heirs of Abraham (Romans 4:13)

A. Not by the Law (v. 13a)

13a. It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world,

Paul does not exclude the Jewish people from God's concern, nor does he minimize the importance of the Torah (the Law of Moses). But Paul builds on the insight that *the promise* predates *the law* (see lesson 10) since *Abraham* lived before Moses (about 2167–1992 BC and 1530–1410 BC, respectively) and the giving of the law (Exodus 19–20). Thus, it follows that the promise was the foundation of the law rather than the other way around (see Galatians 3:17).

The idea that Abraham would inherit *the world* comes in part from Genesis 12:1–3, which describes Abraham's offspring as a blessing to the world. This was sometimes interpreted as meaning that Abraham's family would literally govern all the world. But we see that Jesus' followers—Abraham's true *offspring* (Galatians 3:7)—inherit the world (1 Corinthians 3:21–23; see Romans 4:17, below).

B. The Righteousness of Faith (v. 13b)

13b. but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

Faith, which biblically might be defined as trust in God and his ability and intention to keep his promises, can characterize any person, not only those who were given the law. God is the God of all, both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 3:29). The relationship between God and humans rests on something deeper than the law, the thing that characterizes one group but not the other. That deeper reality is faith in Jesus. God chooses to credit us with righteousness when we come to him through such faith. *Through the righteousness* that only comes from God's gift to us, we also stand to inherit the world as promised to Abraham.

II. Supporting Arguments (Romans 4:14–25)

A. Not the Promise (vv. 14–15)

14. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless,

Salvation comes from God's *promise* since God saves "the ungodly" (Romans 4:5; 5:6). Nothing that we can do can save us. This radical confession has roots in the Old Testament, which also affirms that human achievement does not deliver in the final analysis. The analogy of earthly deliverance (examples: Psalms 44:3; 106:6–8; Hosea 11:7–11) is a precursor to the reality of eternal salvation (examples: Numbers 21:4–9; John 3:14–15).

Rather, the Law of Moses leads one to love God and fellow human beings (Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5; see Matthew 22:37–40). Paul does not mean that Jews or Gentile converts who keep *the law* cannot also trust God. But what was promised because of faith still required faith; law-keeping could not substitute for trusting God (Galatians 3:18).

Paul's language seems very strong here. He does not reject keeping the Torah for Jews, only the insistence that Gentiles must do so as well (Acts 15). One of the ironies of history has been that the situation reversed itself in the centuries after Paul so that Judaism and Christianity became separate religions, with Christians often persecuting Jews and using this and other texts to justify doing so. In Paul's setting, that situation had not arisen, and his statements must be understood in his different context without condoning any religious violence.

15. because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

At the same time, *the law* has limitations. No one can violate a law that does not exist (Romans 5:13). The law could define sin's precise contours and clarify what effects it has, but it cannot save. It *brings wrath*, that is, it provokes God's anger when humans break his law. Since God's wrath is justified and necessary to bring about justice, the law's function to notify us of boundaries serves a spiritually useful purpose.

Romans 1:18–32 catalogs the results of a life of sin, the terrible list of ways humans have of harming each other and themselves. These actions provoke God's righteous indignation, but also lead to God's mercy toward precisely all of us caught up in such evils (Romans 6:1–4). The Law of

Moses emphasizes God's sense of justice and desire for humans to live together with justice and righteousness—the appropriate responses to a genuine love for God.

B. Abraham's Trust (vv. 16–22)

16. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

This verse makes two interrelated points. First, God's saving work extends to all who will receive it in *faith* by trusting God's promises and counting on God's mercy, justice, and protection. The Law of Moses was a gift from God for previously enslaved people so that they could experience a life of real freedom (Deuteronomy 30:11–20). Its many provisions tended toward building a community of mutual support and justice (examples: Exodus 22; Deuteronomy 15).

Second, the promise to bless the world (Genesis 12:1–3) extends to all who imitate *Abraham* in trusting God. Descent from the patriarch involves not ancestral DNA (Luke 3:8) but a similar faith-filled life. God's work was bigger than the law could accommodate, and God's *grace* extends to both Jews and Gentiles who trust him.

17. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

Verse 17 offers evidence for the previous verses' assertions by quoting Genesis 17:5. Part of a story of renewed promises to Abraham, this statement reveals the enormous consequences of the then-soon-to-be-fulfilled promise of a child, Isaac (see Genesis 21:1–7). The promise extends even to the raising of *the dead*. This happened metaphorically for Abraham and Sarah, who were long past childbearing age (see also Hebrews 11:12), and literally for Jesus as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). The entire story of Israel and the church is one of unimagined possibilities coming to life thanks to God's saving work.

The final clause alludes to the story of God's creation of the world (Genesis 1:1–2:4), through which nonexistent things became realities. God's creative work did not cease long ago but continues until all things are made new (Revelation 21:5). Creation and redemption form two sides of the same coin because both come from God's love and proceed toward the well-being of the creature.

18. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Genesis repeats the promises to *Abraham* three times (Genesis 12; 15; 17). Paul moves backward from the third to the second occurrence, quoting Genesis 15:5 with *so shall your offspring be*. Paul interprets the quoted text in two ways simultaneously. First, the promise of offspring came to Abraham, and it was fulfilled. And second, the offspring would be like Abraham, full of hope for God's redemptive work.

Hope in the Bible is never simply wishful thinking. It is the expectation that something is to occur that is neither a given nor impossible. Two examples illustrate this: sunrise is a given, so we do not hope for it; flying under one's own power is impossible, so we do not hope for that, either. Nor is hope simply an emotional or intellectual state. For Paul, hope is an anticipation of an

objective reality, the thing expected as much as the feeling of expectation. Hope can be laid up for us in God's presence (Colossians 1:5).

To hope *against hope* means that Abraham had no natural basis for believing he and Sarah could have a child. He and his wife had long passed the age of childbearing, and Sarah was postmenopausal (Genesis 17:17). The childbirth required a miracle, and the couple trusted God to provide that without knowing how it would occur.

19. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead.

Paul ignores indications of Abraham's doubts in Genesis 15:2–3 and his ill-conceived attempt to "help" God by impregnating Hagar (Genesis 16). We might be encouraged that such major lapses in judgment and trust did not nullify Abraham's faith.

Instead, Paul's argument focuses on Abraham's ultimate acceptance of God's trustworthiness. For Abraham to focus on his or Sarah's limitations rather than the divine promises would have equaled weakness *in faith*. While Abraham recognized his and Sarah's physical states, he did not see that natural limit as the end of the possibilities available to God. Paul asks his readers to embrace this same mixture of realism and hope. As creatures of God, we know our limits but recognize that God's freedom and mercy need not always be channeled within those limits.

20. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,

This verse restates the ideas of the previous sentences but adds two dimensions. First, it clarifies what Abraham believed when he trusted God's *promise*. The grammar of the Greek text serves to emphasize the promise that Abraham trusted rather than his act of believing God. God's action precedes and forms the basis for Abraham's faith.

Second, this verse also proposes that Abraham's trust equaled glorifying *God*. Words of praise, no matter how beautiful, do not really bring honor to God unless the one who is praising lives in the hope that God's promises will be fulfilled.

21. being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

Here concludes the analysis of Abraham's trust as confidence in God's ability and willingness to act benevolently for the benefit of human beings. The verse also describes an aspect of God's promises: they are not idle words.

22. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."

Paul refers here to Genesis 15:6: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." God *credited to Abraham righteousness*, not because Abraham had done good deeds or avoided evil, but because he had staked his life and his family's future on God's promises starting in Genesis 12.

Paul uses Genesis 15:6 to paint a sharp contrast between a relationship built on command and obedience (under the Law of Moses) and one built on promises and trust. Many of his Jewish audience would probably have thought Paul overstated the case, since keeping the law ideally did show one's trust in, and love for, God. Yet Paul makes this distinction because he wishes to show that God keeps the ancient promises through the faithfulness of the Messiah, Jesus, and that the promises embrace both Jews and Gentiles.

C. Our Basis of Hope (vv. 23–25)

23. The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone,

If God was to keep the promise to Abraham that he would become the ancestor of many nations, then the act of crediting righteousness to him based on faith must extend to others who do the same thing. Otherwise, God would be a respecter of persons, a player of favorites (contrast Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11–16; Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9).

Whereas Abraham trusted God’s promise of descendants who would bless the world, Paul’s readers, ancient and modern, trust in the promise God sealed by raising Jesus from the dead. Simply believing that the resurrection of Jesus happened historically does not equate to having saving faith (compare James 2:19). To believe in the resurrection means to imitate Christ in his sufferings (2 Corinthians 13:4; Galatians 2:19–20; Philippians 3:10–11; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14). It means to trust in the final resurrection of the dead, of which Jesus’ resurrection is the promissory note (1 Corinthians 15:20–28).

24. but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

When does God *credit* us as righteous? The verb tense of the underlying Greek could indicate a future time, such as the last judgment. But the Greek may also indicate something just about to happen or a certainty with uncertain timing. Perhaps Paul does not mean to be overly precise, as there are mysteries about the future that no one knows (Matthew 24:36). Or perhaps he signals the fact that justification occurs now *and* later as God continuously sustains a relationship with those who trust in his promises. This latter interpretation is in keeping with what can be referred to as the now/not yet of God’s kingdom. We are *now* part of God’s kingdom, but we are *not yet* experiencing its fullness (see Romans 8:22–25).

25. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Paul’s language echoes Isaiah 53:6, 12, which anticipated that the suffering servant would be handed over to his enemies to make “intercession for the transgressors” (compare similar language in 1 Corinthians 15:3). Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant was a key text for early Christians in understanding Jesus not as a tragic figure or a victim of state violence, but as the Messiah who died on behalf of others. His death was necessary to pay the price for sins, but it would have been incomplete without a resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12–19). Jesus joined in the suffering brought about by sin in order to free from sin’s power those who trust God’s promises.

Conclusion

A. We Are Not Alone

God counts us as righteous when we, like Abraham, trust the promises of redemption and live accordingly. We are not righteous because of the good we do or the evil we avoid, but because God acknowledges us as loyal to him, staking all our hopes on his promises. And his offer of salvation extends to all because sin has wrecked us all. We stand together in both our need and our hope.

This unity of humanity may show itself in different ways. We might wallow together in our sin, growing increasingly hostile to each other and sacrificing our common humanity on the altar of greed, envy, pride, and hatred. Or we might acknowledge our need, trust in God's mercy, and so join in a community built on such a faith. The choice belongs to us.

How do we build a community on such a basis? A church full of people who trust in God's promises live generous, open-hearted, kind lives. They, like Abraham, show hospitality to strangers as though they were angels (Hebrews 13:2). Such a church values the whole trajectory of a person's life of faith, emphasizing neither failures nor heroic successes but faithfulness in the face of adversity (James 1:2–3) and God's seeming slowness to act (2 Peter 3:9). This community of believers knows itself to be saved, not because of its own merits but because of God's mercy.

B. Prayer

God of Abraham and all who trust you, focus our minds not on our own limitations but on your great love for your creation. Thank you for Jesus' sacrifice, which we accept in faith as reconciling us to you. In his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Justification by faith is not an abstract idea but a reality for life.¹
