

Faith Counted as Righteousness

As we begin this lesson, it is helpful to remember where we left off in Genesis. In our previous study we looked at Genesis 15 and God's remarkable encounter with Abram. The more I think about that account, the more striking it becomes.

We read these stories so often that they become familiar, and sometimes we lose the wonder of what actually happened. Abram was simply living his life in Ur of the Chaldeans when God appeared to him and said, in effect, "Abram, this is what I am going to do for you." Abram believed Him and followed.

Last time we also talked about God's promise, "I am your shield." Abram was concerned because God had promised descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore, yet he still had no son. He wondered if his servant would become his heir. God assured him that his heir would come from his own body.

Then comes one of the most important statements in all of Scripture:

"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

That verse becomes the foundation for everything Paul develops in Romans 4, and it is where we begin our study today.

The Language of God's Accounting

Last week we spent a little time looking at the word translated *counted*. I think it is helpful to remember that this is an accounting term.

In Leviticus the same word is used when the Israelites calculated the value of property based on the number of years remaining until the Year of Jubilee. It was a bookkeeping term. Numbers were calculated, accounts were settled, and records were established.

That helps me picture what happened with Abraham.

Of course, God does not literally keep books with paper and pen, but I can almost picture a heavenly record in which God entered Abraham's account and declared him righteous. It was officially counted to him. It was placed on his account.

That same principle is at the heart of our salvation as well.

Paul is not introducing a new doctrine in Romans. He is explaining what God had already demonstrated centuries earlier in Abraham's life.

Wages and Grace

Romans 4 begins with an important question:

"What then shall we say that Abraham our forefather according to the flesh has found?"

Paul immediately answers by quoting Genesis:

"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

Then he introduces an illustration every working person understands.

"Now to the one who works, his wage is not counted according to grace, but according to what is due."

Sometimes it helps simply to stop and ask what the verse is saying in ordinary language.

Suppose you work for two weeks and receive your paycheck. When your employer hands it to you, you do not say, "Thank you for your wonderful gift."

Why not?

Because it is not a gift.

You earned it.

If your employer refused to pay you, you would not shrug your shoulders and think, "Well, I guess I don't get my gift this week." You would rightly say, "I worked for that. It belongs to me."

That is Paul's point. Wages are earned. Grace is not earned.

Romans 6 tells us that "the wages of sin is death." Sin pays a wage, and the paycheck is death. Salvation, however, is entirely different.

God does not pay salvation as wages for work performed. He gives it as an act of grace. That is why Paul can say,

"To the one who does not work, but believes upon Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."

Everything in this passage turns on grace. Grace is God's unmerited favor. It is something given freely out of His kindness, not something earned by our performance.

David Saw the Same Truth

Paul does something fascinating next.

He reaches back into the Old Testament once again, this time quoting David from Psalm 32.

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

I find that especially interesting.

Paul was thoroughly trained in the Old Testament Scriptures. After coming to faith in Christ, he began seeing truths that had been there all along.

Apparently, when he read Psalm 32, he noticed that David used the very same accounting language.

Earlier Paul spoke about righteousness being credited to a believer's account.

Now David speaks about sin **not** being charged to that account.

The same accounting principle works in both directions.

God counts righteousness to those who believe. He does not count their sins against them. That is an astonishing truth. As believers, we often spend our lives trying to convince ourselves that God thinks well of us. We feel as though we must somehow improve His opinion.

But according to David, our sins have been forgiven and covered. God is not writing them down in order to use them against us later.

That does not mean God ignores disobedience. Like a loving Father, He disciplines His children for their growth and correction. But parental discipline is very different from judicial condemnation.

David says,

"Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

God is not entering those sins into the ledger.

Instead, because we have believed Him, He has written something else next to our names.

Righteous.

That is an important truth to remember.

Why Circumcision Cannot Be the Basis

Paul then turns to the subject of circumcision. His argument is straightforward. When was Abraham declared righteous? Was it before circumcision or afterward?

The answer is clear from Genesis.

God counted Abraham righteous before circumcision had ever been given as the sign of the covenant. That means God's declaration of righteousness cannot depend upon circumcision.

If Abraham was justified before receiving that sign, then the blessing cannot be limited to the Jewish people alone.

Paul is laying the groundwork for something much larger.

The promise God made to Abraham extends beyond one nation. It reaches everyone who believes God as Abraham believed Him.

A Promise Received by Faith

Paul continues,

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

That statement is worth pausing over.

When we think about God's promises to Abraham, we usually think about descendants, the land, and the nation of Israel.

But Paul says something even broader.

He speaks of Abraham becoming **heir of the world**.

As we continue through Romans and later into Galatians, Paul will explain that the ultimate Seed is Christ, and that all who belong to Christ become heirs together with Abraham.

That is why this study is not merely about understanding an Old Testament story.

It is about understanding what God has promised to everyone who believes Him.

Just as Abraham believed God's promise and was counted righteous, every person who believes God today receives that same declaration of righteousness by faith.

The Promise Belongs to All Who Believe

Paul continues his argument in Romans 4 by drawing our attention to something we often overlook.

He writes,

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

Most of us naturally think of Abraham as the father of the Jewish nation. That is certainly true, but Paul says something much larger here.

He says Abraham was promised that he would be **heir of the world**.

That causes us to stop and think about everything God actually promised Abraham. Paul's point is that those promises were never earned by obedience to the law. They came because God counted Abraham righteous through faith.

Later Paul will explain that the ultimate Seed is Christ, and all who belong to Christ become heirs with Abraham. As we read these verses, we should keep bringing them home personally. This is not merely an interesting Bible lesson about someone who lived thousands of years ago. The God of the universe justified Abraham by faith, and everyone who believes that same God is counted righteous and becomes an heir with Abraham of the promises God made.

A Promise Cannot Be Changed

Paul's next argument is both simple and powerful.

"For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith has been made empty and the promise has been abolished."

What is he saying?

If God gives someone a promise and later replaces that promise with a list of requirements, then it is no longer a promise at all.

Think about it in everyday terms.

Suppose parents tell their son or daughter, "When you graduate from high school, we're going to give you a car."

Graduation comes, and the child naturally expects to receive the promised gift.

But then the parents say, "Before you can have the car, you need to complete a semester of college. You also need to give us a thousand dollars. You must pay all the insurance, and there are several other requirements as well."

That is no longer the same promise. The conditions have changed.

Or think about signing a contract.

My neighbor has talked with me about purchasing a piece of land I own across the creek from his property. We have not yet settled on a price, but once we agree and sign the

contract, it would not be right for me to come back later and say, "I've decided I want another thousand dollars."

Once the agreement has been made, the terms cannot simply be changed.

Paul says God's promise works the same way.

If the inheritance suddenly depends upon law-keeping, then faith has been emptied of its meaning because the promise itself has been altered. God does not operate that way.

His promise remains exactly what He said it would be.

Guaranteed by Grace

Paul then explains why salvation must come through faith.

"For this reason it is by faith in order that it might be according to grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the seed."

That word **guaranteed** is important.

If salvation depended upon our ability to keep God's law, no one could ever be certain of it. But because it rests upon God's gracious promise, it is guaranteed. Nor is it guaranteed only to Jewish believers.

Paul continues,

"...not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all."

He is not saying every person in the world automatically belongs to Abraham. He is speaking about all who believe. The promise belongs to every believer.

That is why Abraham truly becomes the father of many nations.

Father of Many Nations

God told Abraham,

"A father of many nations I have made you."

When we hear those words, most of us instinctively think about Israel. But Israel is only one nation. Paul reminds us that Abraham's family is much larger than that. Everyone who believes God becomes part of that family.

Most of us are Gentiles. Our ancestors may have come from Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, or countless other places around the world. Yet through faith in Christ we become heirs of Abraham's promise.

That is why Abraham truly is the father of many nations.

People from every language, every ethnicity, and every nation who place their faith in Christ become sons and daughters of Abraham through faith.

The God Abraham Believed

Paul next describes the God in whom Abraham placed his trust.

He is the God,

"...who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist."

That description invites us to think about God's limitless power.

Certainly it reminds us of creation itself. God spoke, and things that had never existed came into being.

I also think of the words spoken to the Pharisees when they boasted that Abraham was their father. They were reminded that God could raise up children for Abraham even from the stones lying on the ground.

That is an astonishing thought.

However we understand those words, they remind us that nothing is impossible for God. He is able to accomplish what no human being could ever imagine. That is exactly the kind of God Abraham trusted.

Hope Against Hope

Paul then describes Abraham's faith in unforgettable language.

"In hope against hope he believed."

We still use that expression today.

Sometimes someone is desperately ill, and although every human possibility seems exhausted, family members continue hoping.

That is what "hope against hope" means.

Humanly speaking, there was no reason for Abraham to expect a son. He was nearly one hundred years old. Sarah was ninety.

God had specifically promised that the child would come from their own bodies.

Imagine standing where Abraham stood. He considered his own body "as good as dead." He considered the deadness of Sarah's womb. He thought about every human obstacle.

Yet Paul says,

"With respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief."

That statement always amazes me. Abraham certainly wrestled with questions along the way, yet when everything is finally summed up, Scripture says he did not waver in unbelief.

Instead,

"...he grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform."

I think that is one of the clearest definitions of biblical faith. Faith is believing what God has said. Sometimes we try to believe God for things He has never actually promised. We sincerely hope He will do them, but biblical faith rests upon God's revealed promises.

God has spoken.

Faith believes what He has spoken.

That is what Abraham did, and because he believed, it was counted to him as righteousness.

Believing God's Promises

Even as believers, we sometimes struggle with this. For example, I may pray for one of my children or grandchildren who already knows Christ and ask, "Lord, be with them today." There is certainly nothing wrong with praying that way. Yet I also have to remind myself what God has already promised. Has He not said that He will never leave us nor forsake us?

In one sense, I am asking God to do something He has already promised to do. The same thing happens in many areas of the Christian life. God has made promises in His Word. Our responsibility is to believe them.

That is especially true regarding salvation itself.

God says,

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

He says,

"Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

When someone says, "I don't know whether God really saved me," we have to bring them back to God's own words.

What did God promise?

Biblical faith is not simply saying, "I believe." It is trusting the promises God Himself has spoken. That is the faith Paul says God counts as righteousness.

Living in the Freedom of God's Promise

Paul closes Romans 4 by bringing Abraham's experience directly to us. Everything he has said about Abraham has been leading to this point.

After describing Abraham's unwavering faith, Paul writes,

"Therefore it was counted to him as righteousness."

Then he immediately adds,

"Now not for his sake only was it written that it was counted to him, but for our sake also."

That is an important transition.

Genesis 15 was not recorded simply to preserve an interesting moment in Abraham's life. It was written for us as well. The same God who counted Abraham righteous now counts as righteous all who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

Once again Paul uses that accounting language. God is still crediting righteousness to those who believe.

He then summarizes the gospel in a few simple words:

"He who was delivered over on account of our transgressions and was raised on account of our justification."

Even here the language of accounting appears again. Christ was delivered over because of our sins, and through His resurrection we stand justified before God.

We Often Underestimate Our Sin

One of the problems I see over and over again is that we tend to replace God's standard with our own.

People often say something like, "I'm a pretty good person."

What do they usually mean? They are comparing themselves with other people.

"I help my neighbors."

"I give to people in need."

"I take care of injured animals."

"I try to live a good life."

Measured by human standards, those may all seem like admirable things. But God measures us by a different standard. Even as Christians, I think we often underestimate how serious our sin really is.

Oddly enough, realizing the true depth of our sin should not drive us farther from God. It should increase our love for Him because we begin to understand the greatness of what He has forgiven.

More Than a Few Daily Failures

I frequently meet sincere Christians who tell me that every night before going to bed they make sure to confess every sin they committed during the day.

Should we confess our sins?

Certainly.

But then they begin listing what they remember.

Perhaps they lost their temper.

Perhaps they became impatient.

Perhaps they spoke harshly to someone.

Usually they can think of three or four things.

Yet our sins are far more numerous than that.

Jesus said we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.

Not ninety percent.

All.

How many moments during a single day do we fail to love God with that complete devotion?

Then Jesus added the second great commandment:

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

If I am honest, I do not do that perfectly either.

I have a wonderful neighbor. He has often helped me, loaned me tools, and even come over to solve electrical problems around my house.

When I mow my lawn, however, I do not automatically mow his. I care about him, but I do not love him exactly as I love myself.

That is only one simple illustration of how far short we all fall.

Our failures include not only wrong actions, but also wrong thoughts, neglected opportunities to do good, selfish motives, and countless ways we fail to love God as we should.

The pile is much larger than we usually imagine.

Forgiven Much, Loving Much

At first, thinking about the greatness of our sin can feel discouraging.

But there is another side to it. When we realize how much God has actually forgiven, our love for Him grows.

Jesus spoke of the woman who anointed His feet and said,

"He who has been forgiven much loves much."

If I imagine that God has only forgiven me a few isolated failures each day, His forgiveness may not seem nearly as astonishing.

But when I begin to understand that He has forgiven the entire mountain of my sin—the sins I committed, the good I failed to do, the selfish thoughts I entertained, the ways I failed to love Him completely—then His grace becomes far more precious.

Scripture asks the question,

"If God should mark iniquities, who could stand?"

The answer is obvious.

No one.

If God actually kept an account of every sin against us, none of us could stand before Him.

But that is exactly what Paul has been teaching.

God does **not** count those sins against those who believe.

Instead, He counts us as righteous because of Christ.

Galatians Says the Same Thing

Before closing, Paul develops the very same argument in Galatians 3.

He writes,

"Just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness, so know that those who are of faith, those are the sons of Abraham."

That could hardly be stated more clearly.

If you have trusted Christ, you are one of Abraham's children through faith.

Paul continues,

"The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the gospel beforehand to Abraham."

The blessing promised to Abraham was never intended for one ethnic group alone. It was always God's purpose to justify believing Gentiles as well.

Paul then reminds us that everyone who seeks acceptance through the law stands under a curse because the law requires perfect obedience. No one keeps it perfectly.

James reminds us that if we stumble in one point, we become guilty of all.

That is why we do not want our standing before God to rest upon law-keeping.

Yet many Christians still live as though God's acceptance rises and falls with their daily performance.

At the end of a difficult day they think, "God must be disappointed with me." They feel as though they need to bring another offering, just as Israel continually brought sacrifices under the old covenant.

But those sacrifices pointed forward to Christ.

The sacrifice has already been made. We do not need to keep trying to earn what God has already given by grace.

The Promise Still Stands

Paul concludes with what may be the heart of the entire discussion.

He reminds his readers that once a covenant has been ratified, its terms cannot simply be changed.

The same principle applies to God's covenant with Abraham.

God made His promise to Abraham.

Then, four hundred thirty years later, He gave the Law through Moses.

The Law did not erase the promise.

It could not alter it.

If the inheritance depended upon law, it would no longer come through promise.

But God granted it to Abraham through promise.

That promise still stands.

The chapter closes with one final statement that gathers everything together:

"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise."

That is an extraordinary declaration.

If you belong to Christ, you belong to Abraham's family.

You are an heir of God's promise.

Exactly how every aspect of that inheritance will unfold is something I cannot claim to understand completely. We know we will reign with Christ, and we know we are fellow heirs with Him. There is still much to learn about all that God has prepared.

But this much is clear.

The promises God made to Abraham belong to those who believe.

Just as Abraham believed God and was counted righteous, so everyone who belongs to Christ stands before God clothed in that same righteousness and shares in the inheritance God promised by grace.