

RECKONED AS RIGHTEOUS

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Romans 4

VERSES TO REMEMBER

[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. (Rom. 4:20b–21)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	May 6	Matt. 20:1–16	God Is Generous to the Unworthy
T	May 7	Gen. 13:14–18	A Great and Blessed Nation
W	May 8	Gen. 15:1–6	A Promise of Countless Heirs
Th	May 9	1 John 2:12–17	Little Children, Your Sins Are Forgiven
F	May 10	Ps. 32	God's Abundant Forgiveness
Sa	May 11	Rom. 4:1–12	Trust God, Who Justified the Ungodly

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Did you ever learn the song about Father Abraham, perhaps in a church camp setting? Recognizing that there should be (and probably are) more gender-inclusive lyrics, here is how you may have learned it:

Father Abraham had many sons
 Many sons had Father Abraham
 I am one of them and so are you
 So let's just praise the Lord.

You then add in motions, saying first *right arm* with a chopping motion of that arm. You repeat the song multiple times, adding on subsequent motions: *left arm, right leg, left leg, chin up, tongue out, turn around, sit down*. By the end, you are moving around like a robot gone haywire, and the song has devolved into almost incomprehensible silliness. (But it does get a group of kids to all sit down at the end, which makes it worth a try in some settings!)

Here's my take in light of today's text: I don't think the apostle Paul would like this song. While he may appreciate an

energetic bunch of Christian campers singing about Father Abraham’s children with the sentiment, “I am one of them and so are you,” the robotic motions as a form of praise would trouble him.

Paul writes to a church made up of both Jewish and Gentile converts, in which the question of what defines God’s people is an ongoing, and sometimes contentious, topic. We see it pointedly in the letter to the Galatians, and also here in Romans. The question is: In order to become a Christian, does a Gentile need to first adhere to the law of Moses, particularly in the requirement for circumcision? And what about other observances of Jewish tradition around food or Sabbath laws? In other words, how do you become a child of Father Abraham now, if you want to follow Jesus? Paul’s answer is in our passage today, and it doesn’t include everyone going through the same motions.

God of Abraham and Sarah, give us faith like our ancestors who trusted in you, the promise-keeper and life-giver. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Romans 4:13–25

4:13 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. ¹⁴For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.

¹⁶For 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, ¹⁷as 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. ¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So shall your descendants be.” ¹⁹He 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. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

“it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”²³ Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone²⁴ 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.

FAITH OF OUR FATHERS AND MOTHERS

Paul turns his attention to Abraham in the fourth chapter of Romans. He does this not just to give an example of one who is justified by faith, but as a way to say some crucial truths about the God who justifies. We first meet Abraham (then called Abram) in the list of Noah’s descendants (Gen. 11) and follow him for thirteen chapters. God gives Abram a call and a promise: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.²¹ I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Gen. 12:1–3). It’s a promise from God of a place, but also of a people. God promises to make from Abram and Sarai a great nation that will bless everyone.

God refines the promise in subsequent chapters. When Abram laments his lack of offspring, God calls him outside his tent and says, “‘Look toward the heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. . . . So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:5–6).

Years later, Abram and his wife Sarai are still living on faith in God’s promise, with no child of their own in sight. When Abram is ninety-nine years old, and Sarai not far behind, God renews the promise again, changing their names to Abraham and Sarah, and giving Abraham instructions about circumcision as a sign of the covenant, a kind of badge of membership. Abraham complies, including his whole household in the ritual. In chapter 18, three visitors repeat God’s promise, causing Sarah to laugh. She and Abraham are too old. How can it be? Yet in chapter 21, it finally happens: Isaac is born! The rest of Genesis shares the family’s growth into the nation of Israel. God’s promised future is underway.

Paul wants us to notice that God reckoned Abraham as righteous *before* he was circumcised, hundreds of years *before* God

gave Moses the law (Exod. 20). Abram’s righteousness came not through the law but through faith. Abraham and Sarah trusted God through long years, “hoping against hope” and “being fully convinced that God was able to do what [God] had promised” (Rom. 4:18, 21). Now, Paul says, we are also made righteous (“reckoned”) through that same trusting faith in the same life-giving God who raised Jesus from the dead.

 What parts of Abraham and Sarah’s story speak to you of faith?

THE RECKONING OF FAITH

My family uses the word *reckon* in several different ways. My grandmother worked long hours in a post office. Each day she tallied up stamps and other sales, *reckoning*, as she called it. She would also frequently use the word *reckon* when she stated her opinion (“I reckon he’s telling the truth”) or projected a plan (“I reckon we’ll eat around noon.”) When God reckons Abraham as righteous, it’s in all those senses. In God’s opinion, the calculation is all in Abraham’s favor, and God’s plan is sure. Paul extends the same reckoning to Gentiles, and so to us.

Paul describes Abraham’s faith in God, whom he trusted to fulfill the covenant promises. Abraham believed that God would do what God said would be done. Through long years of wandering and wondering, Abram and Sarai both stayed faithful, even when Sarai laughed and Abram questioned. They didn’t abandon God or give up. They believed God would create a family that would bless the world. As years went on, the biological possibility seemed absurd. But they knew God as the One who created the universe out of nothing and breathed life into dust. Their God is full of possibility.

Paul says faith like that is also what justifies God’s people in the time after Jesus the Messiah. It’s faith in the same creative, life-giving God, who brings new life out of the tomb. In Jesus, Gentiles can have faith in the same God Abraham and Sarah knew, the God of possibility and creation. You don’t join the family by observing rituals or laws to make yourself acceptable to that kind of God. Abraham certainly didn’t; those rituals and laws didn’t exist yet. Rather, you trust in God’s promises to the family of faith, of which you are a part by grace. Paul points out that God always intended the covenant to include “many

nations” (vv. 17, 18). The Gentiles are the newest children of the family that began with Father Abraham and Mother Sarah. Joining doesn’t come through circumcision or law, but through a trusting faith like they had.

That’s where Paul’s problem with the motions in Father Abraham’s song come in. Through Jesus, all can become a child of Father Abraham: “I am one of them, and so are you.” But it’s not because we all follow instructions given: *right arm, left arm, keep the Sabbath, circumcise*. It’s because God gives us faith through grace, the same kind of faith Abraham and Sarah had, in the same God they knew. All can join, no matter what kind of unrobotic freestyle dance moves you use to praise God. I reckon even you and I can.

 **What does it mean to you to have faith in the creative God of new life and new possibilities?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Do we live that way? Do we trust that God has a good future in mind, even when it seems impossible? It makes me think about Sarah and wonder about the intersection between this story and Mother’s Day. Part of Sarah’s pain is of one who wants desperately to be a mother, only to be disappointed repeatedly. Finally, her prayers are answered. What seemed impossible has come to pass. Yet this is not always how our painful stories resolve, with our greatest hopes birthed into being. Indeed, even Sarah’s story is still complicated after Isaac arrives. On Mothers’ Day, we try to be sensitive to those for whom the day is difficult. We bear in mind that it is just one day—a snapshot—of a whole lifetime of days in which some are joyful and some are not. It’s a lifetime in which the God of possibilities is present with us every day. So today, while some of us celebrate and some of us grieve, all of us can remember those who have been like a mother to us and our mothers in faith.

As descendants of Sarah and Abraham, and followers of Jesus, we can walk through our days trusting that God has the future in hand because of who God is and not because of us. We can look for ways God is, even now, birthing something new. Where do you see life, and possibility, and love blooming? Opening our eyes to recognize signs of God at work takes practice and intention. Think about Abraham and those stars outside his tent. Did

God's covenant forever change Abraham's nighttime viewing of the stars, or did he eventually stop seeing in them God's glittering promise? We forget to look with the eyes of faith.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile."¹ Daily we are invited to look for signs of God's covenant faithfulness: In the stars. In the sounds of children singing songs of praise. In the birth and baptism of new babies. In the lives of those who are like a mother to us. In the faith of our ancestors. In the faith of those with whom we study Scripture. In the diverse and dancing family of faith.



How can you intentionally practice looking for and trusting God's faithfulness?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Paul is writing to a mixed Jewish-Gentile church in Rome, and thus he had to address the question of what defines God's people, particularly since Jews had been identifying themselves as God's people by adherence to the law of Moses and in using outward identifiers (circumcision, diet, dress, lifestyle) for centuries.
2. The gist of Paul's argument is that neither Gentiles nor Jews need to submit to a checklist of ritual, diet, dress, or calendar to be, or show themselves to be, God's people, even God's true people descended from Abraham (see also 1 Sam. 16:7). Their lived-out faith in God in a broken world is sign and difference enough (1 Pet. 3:15).
3. This passage echoes many of the same themes we find in Hebrews 11:8–18: Abraham's faith was grounded in who God is, not on merit or his own resources.
4. Paul's goal for the church has always been unity, since infighting neither reflects God nor moves the kingdom mission forward. He accomplishes this by starting both Jews and Gentiles on the same footing in the past (sin; see Rom. 3:9) and with the same basis for relationship with God now (faith, not law; see 4:16; see also John 17:11; Eph. 4:1–6).

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012), 2.