

July 18
Lesson 7 (NIV)

FAITH OF ABRAHAM

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Genesis 15:1–6](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Romans 4](#)

ROMANS 4:1–12

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³ What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. ⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

⁷ “Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

⁸ Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”

⁹ Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹ And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

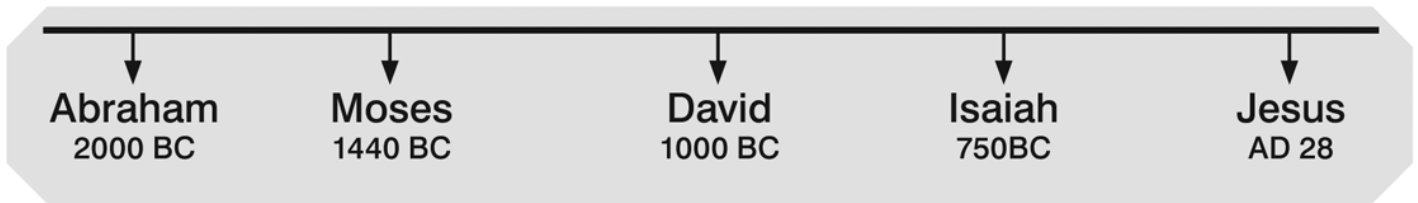


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KEY VERSE

“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” —**Romans 4:3b**

CONFIDENT HOPE

Unit 2: Faith and Salvation

LESSONS 6–9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the nature of Abraham’s righteousness.
2. Distinguish between “imparted righteousness” and “imputed righteousness.”
3. Make a list of ways that imputed (credited) righteousness will direct his or her thoughts and actions in the week ahead.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. The Progenitor of the Printing Press
- B. Lesson Context

- I. Ancestor of Israel (Romans 4:1–3)
 - A. Not Justified by Works (vv. 1–2)
 - B. Justified by Faith (v. 3)

If You Build It, They Will Come

- II. Receiving Righteousness (Romans 4:4–8)
 - A. Not an Earned Reward (vv. 4–5)
 - B. An Unearned Blessing (vv. 6–8)
- III. Father of the Faithful (Romans 4:9–12)

A. Not Limited by Circumcision (vv. 9–10)

B. Given to Followers (vv. 11–12)

A Free Reward

Conclusion

A. Faith and Work

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Abrahamic	<i>Ay-bruh-ham-ik.</i>
Cornelius	<i>Cor-neel-yus.</i>
Hagar	<i>Hay-gar.</i>
Ishmael	<i>Ish-may-el.</i>
Johannes	<i>Gutenberg Yoh-hahn-uhs Goo-tin-burg.</i>
Moriah	<i>Mo-rye-uh.</i>
patriarchs	<i>pay-tree-arks.</i>

Introduction

A. 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.

B. 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](#), below).

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](#) and following, below). 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](#), below). 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 “God-fearing” ([Acts 17:4, 17](#)) in contrast with a “convert” ([Matthew 23:15](#)), who converted fully.

The “God-fearing” 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 by 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 today 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?

I. Ancestor of Israel

(ROMANS 4:1–3)

A. Not Justified by Works (vv. 1–2)

1. What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?

Abraham lived more than 2,000 years before Paul wrote the book of Romans. Abraham's history was preserved by the people of God in oral traditions for several hundred years before it was written down in the book of Genesis.

That man had an incredible relationship with God. He trusted God even when called to journey to a place he had never seen, on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea ([Genesis 12:1–9](#); see [Romans 4:12](#), below). Later, Abraham trusted God to provide him with a legitimate heir, his son Isaac, when both he and his wife, Sarah, were advanced in age ([Genesis 17:15–22](#); [18:10–15](#); [21:1–7](#)). Abraham even trusted God when commanded to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah ([22:1–18](#)).

For these and other acts, Abraham is considered to be the father of faith ([Matthew 3:9](#); [Luke 1:73](#); etc.). He was one of the first to model a faithful relationship with God. Paul focused these facts on his Jewish-Christian readers, identifying Abraham as their father *according to the flesh*. Paul spoke to those who traced their ancestry to the great patriarch of Genesis. Today we would say Paul spoke to those who would find a DNA match with Abraham. Paul's strategy took his line of argumentation to a time even before Israel was a nation.

2. If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.

Paul set up this verse to establish 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*? 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 boast about* himself. But that was not the case.

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?

B. Justified by Faith (v. 3)

3. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Paul’s statement 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 ([Genesis 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.

The evidence in Abraham’s life and marriage compelled him to try to help God’s plan along. Abraham and Sarah had long since passed the season of producing children ([Genesis 17:17](#)). Abraham had resigned himself to the fact that his chief servant would be his heir ([15:2](#)) before Abraham took it upon himself to avoid that possibility by having a son with Hagar ([16:1–4](#), [15](#)).

Even so, Abraham’s faith did not collapse on the basis of his long wait or the seeming impossibility of the fulfillment of God’s promises. 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.

So Abraham lived accordingly and expectantly. This stupendous act of faith gave him the status of a righteous person before a holy and utterly righteous God. The word translated *credited* was used in the financial world of Paul’s day to describe the act of moving credits into an accounting ledger. An account with a negative balance (an unrighteous or unknown status) now showed a positive balance (*righteousness*).

Putting this analogy into our own context, Abraham’s account moved from red ink to black ink. The result for generations to come was that Abraham stood as the father of Israel first, but also of all believers who trust God.

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

When my best friend felt called to found a Christian school, the task seemed impossible. She had no marketing or administrative training, and she certainly didn’t have any money. She was new to town and didn’t know anyone. “God will provide,” she answered when I asked how she was going to find land. She said the same thing when she had no building on the

land, and again when she had no students to fill the building.

Things didn't always go right. But she never doubted it would all come together. She believed, even though it seemed an impossibility. And God provided every person who had the exact skill, material, or financing to create what is now a flourishing, classical Christian school.

Abraham and Sarah were old. Descendants as numerous as the stars? Impossible! Yet Abraham believed. Sometimes he delayed in his obedience or tried his own way. But he never forgot God's word. In life's twists and turns, is your faith still grounded in God's faithfulness?

—P. M.

II. Receiving Righteousness

(ROMANS 4:4–8)

A. Not an Earned Reward (vv. 4–5)

4. Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.

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

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).

5. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

The phrase *the one who does not work* likely refers to the person who does not depend on personal works to be in a right standing before God. No sinner, whether Gentile or Jew, can ever earn *righteousness*. Were someone able to do so, he or she would not need to be *credited* as righteous by *faith* because such a person would actually *be* righteous.

B. An Unearned Blessing (vv. 6–8)

6. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

The line of reasoning moves from one revered Jewish figure (Abraham) to another (*David*), a historical shift of about 1,000 years. 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](#)).

What Do You Think?

How would you explain to someone the distinction between being credited (or counted) as righteous vs. actually being made righteous?

Digging Deeper

In what circumstances might you explain the difference by using the words imputed

7–8. "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them."

David wrote of his experience of being forgiven, and the quote in the verses before us is that of David's marvelous [Psalm 32:1–2](#). This is a passage on confession of sin, repentance, and received forgiveness. In it, David exhorted others to realize that happiness is found in God's forgiveness. Confession releases the disease that wastes the bones of the guilty ([32:3–4](#)) and opens a person to God's forgiveness ([32:5, 11](#); see also [1 John 1:9](#); compare [Psalm 51](#)).

III. Father of the Faithful

([ROMANS 4:9–12](#))

A. Not Limited by Circumcision (vv. [9–10](#))

9. Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness.

Circumcision was the physical mark given by God to Abraham and his male descendants as a sign of the covenant ([Genesis 17:11–13](#)). It was given later in Abraham's life by God's command. Abraham and every male in his household were circumcised in obedience to God's requirement ([17:10, 23](#)). Abraham chose to obey this command just as he had already obeyed God many times before. The mark itself, though, did not make Abraham or the men in his house more righteous. Abraham was already reckoned as righteous because of his *faith* in God.

Faith is stronger than works.



Sheet 6—Summer 2021, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Lesson 7

Visual for Lesson 7. Have this visual displayed prominently as you ask learners why the statement on it is true.

10. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!

The Jewish people assumed that their blessings were owed at least partly to obedience in circumcision. But Paul argues convincingly otherwise: Abraham's faith was *credited* to him as righteousness *before* that sign was implemented, which sign was not commanded until [Genesis 17:10](#). Thus the sign of circumcision was of less importance than the faith behind it.

This fact was important in affirming that circumcision was not necessary for the faith of Gentiles to be valid in following Christ (see [Lesson Context](#)). “No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” ([Romans 2:29](#); compare [Deuteronomy 10:16](#); [30:6](#); [Jeremiah 4:4](#)).

Outward obedience to God's rules and regulations does not make a person righteous. Only one's faith and God's grace can result in being reckoned as righteous. Following his commands is a sign of our faith; without that faith, the signs are meaningless.

B. Given to Followers (vv. 11–12)

11. And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.

Paul did not disregard *circumcision* as having no value at all, though. This *sign* and *seal of the righteousness by faith* became a key element in the covenant relationship God developed with Abraham’s Jewish descendants.

Muslims, who claim lineage to Abraham via Ishmael, still practice circumcision as a religious requirement. They consider it a sign of inclusion in the Muslim community. But in contrast to the Abrahamic faiths of Islam and Judaism, circumcision was and is not imposed as a sign of inclusion in the Christian faith. God’s will in this regard was discerned during the first decades of the church’s existence (see [Galatians 2:1–3](#) and the [Lesson Context](#)).

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. Righteousness is imputed (not imparted) to those who believe. And if this seems repetitious, it’s only because Paul himself was repetitious. This is a big deal! And it is worth repeating over and over. Faith is what God wants, not outward signs.

What Do You Think?

When Paul’s statement about Abraham’s spiritual fatherhood-of-all has its desired impact, what changes should others see in your life?

Digging Deeper

What can you do to accelerate the rate of those changes?

As an aside, we note that some think that Christian baptism is the New Testament parallel to Old Testament circumcision. This viewpoint is based on, among other things, a certain interpretation of [Colossians 2:11–12](#). But the illustration there is to compare baptism with “the circumcision made without hands” (see also [Philippians 3:3](#); compare [Ezekiel 44:7](#)). We note that baptism is never referred to as “a sign” or “a seal” in the New Testament (compare [1 Corinthians 1:22](#); [9:2](#); [14:22](#)). Baptism, therefore, does not get its meaning from Old Testament circumcision.

12. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Following Jesus, being a Christian, has nothing to do with physical circumcision. Rather, it is about faith and the life that proceeds from a faithful heart. Forgiveness is not earned or

owed. It is given by the grace of God to those following the New Testament plan of salvation. Paul describes this as walking *in the footsteps of the faith of our father Abraham*, who blazed faith-trail centuries before.

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?

Paul later presents the law as the means of learning what sin is, and he notes the impossibility of keeping the Old Testament law (see [Romans 7](#)). The law does not produce righteousness, but it does yield knowledge of wrongdoing ([Galatians 3:21–22](#)). Abraham's work proceeded from his faith, not from keeping the Law of Moses, which was not given until centuries later.

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.

A FREE REWARD

My son's first job was a paper route. During the week, he would bag each paper and set out to finish delivering before sundown. Though it was hot summer work, all his labors seemed worthwhile when he got his first paycheck. Some weeks later, we visited a coffee drive-through so he could get the two of us beverages. When we reached the window, the barista informed us that the car ahead of us had picked up our tab. This confused our son until we explained what had happened.

There are certain parallels between both cases and today's text. When we work, our time is calculated toward our earned wages. To think salvation comes about the same way is to commit a serious error.

It is the second incident that better illustrates how we have access to salvation: somebody else paid the price, and there was no debt to be paid on our part when we reached the pick-up window. And the grace we receive from God in this regard is so much more refreshing than a beverage!

—P. M.

Conclusion

A. 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 everyday 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 today's 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?

B. Prayer

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

C. Thought to Remember

The Lord is still the Father of the faithful.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with **NIV Bible Student** (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the **NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition**).

Into the Lesson

Write these two column headings on the board:

A Hero from the Past / The Effect on My Present

Invite students to come to the board and write their responses under the two headings. Allow volunteers to elaborate in whole-class discussion.

Transition to Bible study by saying, “Today we will look at a man whose response to God has the power to affect us yet today.”

Into the Word

Ask two learners to alternate in reading aloud the verses of today’s lesson text, [Romans 4:1–12](#). Then divide the class into study groups of four to six to answer the following questions, which you have prepared for distribution on handouts:

- 1—Why did Abraham have no basis for boasting to God?
- 2—On what basis did God impute righteousness to Abraham?
- 3—What is the significance of Abraham’s *first* having believed in God and *then* being circumcised, rather than the other way around?
- 4—How would you diagram the relationship between faith and works?
- 5—What’s the significance of being *counted* as righteous rather than actually being *made* righteous?

Point students to today’s text and allow groups about 10 minutes to answer the questions. Then go through them to fill in gaps by using details from the lesson commentary.

Option. Distribute to one group copies of the “A Story of Faith” exercise from the activity page, which you can download, rather than the five questions above. When you reconvene the class as a whole, let this group report answers first.

Into Life

Ask students to flip their handouts over and write these two column headings at the top:

An Important Component of My Faith
An Important Sign of My Faith

Then ask students to enter under the headers the single elements implied by those respective headers, time limit of one minute to do so. If participants seem to struggle with the difference between a *component* and a *sign*, you can note that a component is a constituent element, while a sign is an indicator. Therefore a sign points to the existence of a constituent element.

When the minute is up, ask class members to find a partner with whom to share what each has written (*Option.* Request that participants not choose their own spouses as partners.) Then ask participants to help their partners with these three tasks, described on handouts (you prepare):

- 1—Draw an arrow from the entry in the first column to the entry in the second column and write

on it how the former results in the latter.

- 2—Draw an arrow from the entry in the second column to the entry in the first column and write on it how the latter indicates (or should indicate) the presence of the former.
- 3—Make a list of ways that imputed righteousness will direct their thoughts and actions in the week ahead.

Wrap up by comparing and contrasting today's text with [Galatians 2:16](#); [Ephesians 2:8–10](#); [1 Thessalonians 1:3](#); [James 2:20–26](#); and this quote from William Booth (1829–1912), founder of the Salvation Army:

Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again—until they can scarcely distinguish which is the one and which is the other.

Option. Distribute copies of the “A Legacy of Faith” exercise from the activity page, to be completed as indicated in no more than one minute. If distributed as a take-home, encourage completion by promising to begin next week's class with it.