

“Welcome One Another Just as Christ Has Welcomed You”

Diocese of West Texas, Fall 2009

Study and Reflection Session 3

Faith/Faithfulness: The Example of Abraham

(Rom 4:1-25)

The Passage: New Revised Standard Version Translation

NRSV Romans 4:1 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 5 But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. 6 So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

7 “Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;

8 blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.”

9 Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” 10 How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, 12 and likewise the ancestor of

the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

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 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 violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he 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 numerous 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), or when he considered 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. 22 Therefore his faith "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 to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

In Rom 3:21-31 (Study and Reflection Session 2), Paul argued that the one God of Jews and Gentiles brings all people into right relationship with one another and with God through one standard for faithfulness – the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. In Rom 4:1-25 Paul provides an interpretation

of the story of God's calling of the Jewish patriarch Abraham from Genesis 12-21. Paul underscores the importance of Abraham as a moral example of faithfulness in his relationship with God. In fact, says Paul, this story confirms that faithfulness defines the contours of being in right relationship with God without regard to circumcision and the observance of the Torah. This story of Abraham thus becomes paradigmatic for the way God's faithfulness calls forth human faithfulness, the theme Paul introduced in Rom 1:17.

Ancient literature regularly emphasized the role of examples or models for shaping the moral life. The moral teachers of the era – rabbis, philosophical teachers, and the father figure of a household – were expected to embody the patterns of behavior they taught others to emulate. Similarly, the literature of the period frequently told narrative stories about exemplary figures from the past to illustrate virtuous living. In Jewish literature, Abraham, the “founding father” of Judaism, was commonly cast in this role as a moral example. In the New Testament, written primarily by Jewish followers of Jesus, three authors highlight Abraham as a moral example. Paul extensively draws on the story of Abraham in Galatians and Romans. Elsewhere, James (2:20-24) and the author of Hebrews (11:8-22) do the same.

In this section of the letter, we will encounter more examples of the key words that contain the *dik-* root (associated with God's justice and righteousness); the *pist-* root, relating to one's trust, confidence, belief, faith and faithfulness; and the verb *logizomai*, first introduced in 3:21-31 as a term used in accounting. You will see that each word group will be translated in slightly different ways from earlier sections, highlighting how certain Greek words carry many different, nuanced meanings.

In the first two reflection sessions, we introduced the important Greek word *dikaiosynē* that we have regularly translated as “justice” (see, for example, Rom 1:16-17 and 3:21, 22, 25, 26). In Romans 4 that same word appears at the heart of Paul's argument. It is most often translated as

“righteousness.” As we noted in the Introduction to this study, the two translations (“justice” or “righteousness”) are deeply interconnected. In Judaism “righteousness” in the eyes of God involves *doing God’s justice* in the world. So, if a person is declared to be “righteous” (or “just”) or is said to have “righteousness” attributed to them by God, it is because they are doing God’s justice in the world.

Similarly, in this section we encounter the Greek verb *logizomai* first used in Rom 3:28 and translated as “to account.” It is a term also found in Psalm 32:2 and Gen 15:6 (both quoted in Rom 4 as part of Paul’s argument). Its use here in Romans 4 highlights Paul’s view that God’s mercy is not earned but is experienced purely as a free gift from God. In this section, though, we are translating the verb as “to reckon” rather than “to account.” The entire passage is about the way God “reckons” *pistis* (faith/faithfulness) as righteousness (or, as being in right relationship with God and neighbor). A person is justified (put in right relationship) with God by faithfulness apart from the observance of Torah. As we saw in the earlier section, the human faithfulness that sets one in right relationship with God is firmly grounded in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:22, 28).

Finally, watch closely throughout this chapter and the entire letter for how Paul uses the Greek phrase “*kata sarka*” (“according to the flesh”). On the one hand, he applies it simply to denote earthly descent from an ancestor (see 1:3; 4:1; 9:3, 5). He also uses it, however, in a more negative sense. The phrase characterizes someone who thinks the way other human beings think, rather than the way God thinks (see Rom 8:4-9, 12-13).

Romans 4:1 What then are we to say? Have we found Abraham to be our ancestor according to the flesh [*kata sarka*]?

As we read in the gospels (see, for example, Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8; John 8:33-40; 53-58), many Jews of the first century claimed a privileged relationship with God by virtue of their earthly descent from Abraham – i.e., being ethnic Jews. This, of

course, would generally exclude Gentiles from participation in the people of God. But Paul has argued throughout the opening chapters of the letter that God is impartial and that both Jews and Gentiles have been brought within the scope of God's saving power (see especially 1:16-17 and 3:9, 21-23, 29-30). So, he now challenges the traditional Jewish assumption with his rhetorical question in 4:1. Who is the "our" to whom Paul refers? Perhaps, he is directing this cautionary question to the Jewish followers of Jesus in the Roman churches who are alienating Gentile followers because they are not ethnic descendants of Abraham. The question would thus suggest the resounding answer, "no!" According to Paul, Abraham is the ancestor of both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus in a much more important way than by means of ethnic lineage.

2 For if Abraham was justified [the verb form of *dikaiosynē*] from works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham trusted [*pisteuō*] God, and it was reckoned [*logizomai*] to him as righteousness [*dikaiosynē*]." 4 Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift [*charis*], but as something due. 5 But to the one not working, but trusting [*pisteuō*] him who justifies the ungodly, such trust [*pistis*] is reckoned [*logizomai*] as righteousness [*dikaiosynē*]. 6 So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons [*logizomai*] righteousness [*dikaiosynē*] apart from works:

7 "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;

8 blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon [*logizomai*] sin."

*In this complex scriptural argument, Paul interprets the story of Abraham's relationship with God as narrated in Genesis 12-21. His main point is that God "reckoned" righteousness (or, "justice") to Abraham because he trusted God's promise that he would have many descendants (Gen 12:2; 15:6) and faithfully acted in reliance on that promise. God recognized that Abraham's trust and faithful response put him in right relationship with God and his neighbor. As we have discussed in earlier sections, the Greek verb *pisteuō* encompasses both trust*

in God and acting faithfully in reliance on that trust. The two aspects of the verb are inseparable. Abraham's pattern of trusting God and acting faithfully in reliance on that trust serves as a scriptural example of what it means to be in right relationship with God and one's neighbor. Now, in Paul's time, it is Jesus who makes clear what it means to trust God and faithfully respond. Through the pattern Paul calls the "faithfulness of Jesus Christ," God has offered all people – even the ungodly – a chance to be in right relationship with God and their neighbor. According to Paul, God is now "reckoning" righteousness to all people who trust God and faithfully respond by living their lives according to the "faithfulness of Jesus Christ."

God initiated the relationship with Abraham (an uncircumcised Gentile at the time) by first giving him the unmerited gift of the promise of descendants. The story begins in Gen 12:1-3 (NRSV) with this promise from God:

"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. 2 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. 3 I 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.'"

Abraham trusted God and obediently accepted the gift. He immediately answered God's call by uprooting his family and household to move to the land of Canaan in reliance on God's promise:

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (NRSV Gen 12:4).

After many ups and downs in Abraham's journey to Canaan with his household, God once again promises Abraham that he will have more descendants than the stars in the heavens (Gen 15:5). At this point, "Abraham trusted God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6, quoted in Rom 4:3).

9 Is this blessedness, then, only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, “Faithfulness [*pistis*] was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness [*dikaiosynē*].” 10 How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness [*dikaiosynē*] of his faithfulness [*pistis*] while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who trust [*pisteuō*] without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness [*dikaiosynē*] reckoned to them, 12 and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised, who are not only circumcised, but who also follow in the footsteps of the faithfulness [*pistis*] that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

*Paul offers his own interpretation of Gen 15:6 in this section of the chapter. In 4:9 notice how he takes the original quote from Gen 15:6 (“Abraham trusted [*pisteuō*] God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”) and replaces the verb *pisteuō* with the noun *pistis*. This recalls our earlier discussions that the Greek verb *pisteuō* encompasses both the aspect of trusting and responding faithfully. Thus, it is easy for Paul to now say in 4:9 that it was Abraham’s faithfulness that was reckoned as righteousness. His faithful response to God was recognized by God as the constitutive element of being in right relationship with God and neighbor.*

*According to Rom 4:10-11, Abraham’s faithfulness took place **before** he was circumcised (see Gen 17:23-27). First came God’s promise, then Abraham’s faithfulness followed by circumcision. According to Paul’s interpretation of the story from Genesis, circumcision becomes the outward sign of the inward disposition of being in right relationship with God that has already taken place. Consequently, argues Paul, based on the example of Abraham, one does not need to be a circumcised, ethnic Jew to be justified with God. Both Gentiles and Jews become descendants of Abraham through their faithfulness – by trusting God and*

acting in reliance on the unmerited gift of the promise of God. In the case of Abraham, the gift was God's promise of descendants. For the followers of Jesus, the gift is the promise of eternal life revealed when God raised the faithful Jesus from the dead.

Thus, even the circumcised Jews who have the Torah as a pattern for living, must also "follow in the footsteps" of the faithful Abraham, who trusted the promise of God and acted in reliance on it. According to Paul, Jews cannot trust in the mere fact of circumcision or in their ethnic descent from Abraham. They must trust in God's promise of new life revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to Paul, one enters a right relationship with God by trusting God's promise of new life in Jesus Christ and faithfully responding by living a Christ-like life without regard to the observance of Torah.

In this way, Abraham becomes "our" ancestor, referring to both Jews and Gentiles who follow Jesus. Abraham was faithful – he trusted God's promise of new life (the promise of a son) and acted in reliance on that promise, despite all evidence to the contrary that he and Sarah could bear children. Likewise, Gentiles can trust in reliance on God's promise, despite the fact that they have not previously been part of the people of God. According to Paul, Abraham's faithfulness serves as an example of the moral pattern of faithfulness that was most clearly revealed in the obedient life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the Torah but through the justifying power [*dikaiosynē*] of faithfulness. 14 For if it is the followers of the Torah who are the heirs, the faithfulness and the promise have been annulled. 15 For the Torah works wrath; but where there is no Torah, neither is there transgression.

Paul continues the argument. God was faithful to Abraham and honored the promise. God justly fulfilled the promise, honoring the faithfulness of Abraham by

giving him and Sarah a son without regard to circumcision and their observance of the Torah, which came later. In other words, God was faithful to God's initial promise, fulfilling the promise because Abraham faithfully responded to God's initiative by moving to a new land. Paul makes a very similar argument in Gal 3:15-23. The logic of the argument in Galatians and Romans runs like this: if the Torah, which came much later than the original promise of a son to Abraham, is the real ground for experiencing God's justice, then God has abandoned the original promise made to Abraham, the promise relied on by Abraham in moving his family to a new land.

16 For this reason it [the promise] is based on faithfulness [*pistis*], in order that the promise might be grounded in God's power for newness of life [*charis*] and guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the followers of the Torah, but also to those who share the faithfulness [*pistis*] of Abraham (for he 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 trusted, the God who is giving life to the dead and calling into existence the things that do not exist. 18 Hoping against hope, he trusted that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." 19 He did not weaken in faithfulness when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead [*nekroō*] (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness [*nekrōsis*: literally, the "deadness"] of Sarah's womb. 20 No distrust [*apistia*] made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he was strengthened in faithfulness [*pistis*] as he gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God was able to do what God had promised. 22 Therefore it [his faithfulness] "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 trust in the One [God] who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead [*nekrōn*], 25 who was handed over [to death] on account of our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

*Thus, through God's promise and faithfulness, the trusting and faithful Abraham becomes the "father of many nations" (the Grk. word *ethnos*, used in Rom 4:17, can be translated either as "nations" or "Gentiles"). Through his faithfulness, without regard to circumcision or the observance of Torah, Abraham becomes the ancestor of both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus in a way that is more significant than merely "according to the flesh" (which would only include Paul and the other Jewish followers of Jesus who are descended ethnically from Abraham and Sarah).*

*The promise is not based on the observance of Torah, however, but the faithfulness of the living God that manifests itself in God's ongoing exercise of the creative, life-giving power that makes new life and brings into existence things that otherwise do not exist. In the case of creation itself (a focus in Rom 1), God brings the world into existence from a formless void – God calls into being that which does not exist. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, God gives them a son when their bodies seemed "dead" – incapable of bearing children. In the case of Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ, God's promise of new life is faithfully fulfilled when God raises the faithful, obedient Jesus from the dead. Notice how Paul uses various forms of the root *nekro-* in 4:19 and 24. He emphasizes that in the case of Abraham, Sarah, and Jesus, it is "death" that in some way leads to new life through the power of God. Now, among the Gentile Christians, God has brought into being a people who had no earlier existence (a Jewish point of view) before trusting the promises of God revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul connects God's faithfulness to the trusting Abraham with God's faithfulness to the obedient Jesus Christ, who went to his death trusting God's call in his life (see Grieb, p. 53).*

Note in Rom 4:20 the process of being "strengthened in faithfulness." In Study and Reflection Session 2, we talked about how one is persuaded about something by observing the ever-mounting evidence in support of that thing. For Paul, faith and faithfulness work the same way. The more one sees God faithfully acting to bring life out of death in everyday situations of faithfulness in human lives, the more one is persuaded (i.e. the more one "has faith" or "confidence") and the more one's faithfulness is strengthened.

For Paul, the God who makes life is the only appropriate object of faith (see also 1 Cor 2:5). We hear nothing about a confessional faith in Jesus Christ. To be faithful in response to God's creative activity in one's life means that one must always be looking for the living God's continuing self-disclosure in the world. Later, in Rom 9:3–10:4, Paul argues that the Jews' commitment to scripture – to the observance of Torah – has blinded them from seeing the revelation of God's new justice revealed in the surprising resurrection of the faithful messiah Jesus. Indeed, as we saw in the previous session, Paul argues in 3:21 that the justice of God has become manifest apart from the Torah, though it was attested by the Torah and the prophets. Only when faithfulness

“... responds to what God is now doing in the world can it begin to try to connect this new understanding with scriptural precedents and figure out how ‘law and prophets witness to it.’ But the reverse could not happen. By reading Leviticus, Deuteronomy, or even Isaiah, one would not conclude to the scandalous death of Jesus on the cross.”
(Johnson, p. 78).

In summary, Paul argues in Romans 4 that Abraham's faithfulness in responding to God's promise of new life – the promise of a son – was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. Mutual faithfulness established the right relationship with God. This happened before Abraham confirmed the covenant with God through circumcision. Thus, concludes Paul, ethnic descent from Abraham is not sufficient for justification (being put in right relationship) with God and neighbor. Instead, Abraham becomes the moral example of faithfulness for both Jews and Gentiles. He responded to God's initiative by trusting God's promise and faithfully acting in reliance on the promise.

According to the logic of Paul's argument, this pattern of mutual faithfulness is reflected in what God is now doing in the world. By raising the faithful Jesus from the dead, God has revealed a newness of life beyond comprehension – resurrection from the dead. God raised Jesus from the dead “for our justification” – so that everyone might be put in right relationship with God and neighbor. This unexpected, divine act also establishes God's promise to everyone – Jews and

Gentiles alike. God promises new and eternal life to those who conform themselves to the pattern of living that Paul calls the "faithfulness of Jesus Christ."

Questions for Reflection

Reflect on these questions as an individual and as a community:

1. What aspects of your life seem "dead" and in need of divine renewal? Can you identify situations where God may be calling you to respond faithfully in ways that give you hope for new life? Can you identify a time when you may have wavered in your faithfulness and distrusted God's promises because of what seemed to be overwhelming odds against you?
2. How do you go about discerning where God is at work in the world? What criteria do you use in making that determination? Can you identify a situation in your own life where you, like many of the Jews in Paul's time, may be blinded by scripture's past precedents and unable to see what God is doing in your life? What does this passage say to you?
3. Describe an experience of God's power in your life – bringing newness of life to a seemingly hopeless situation – that increased your confidence in God's faithfulness. How did it increase or strengthen your own faithfulness going forward? Be specific.
4. Do you think God is calling you to take a new direction in your own life? Describe what evidence leads you to that conclusion. Do you have enough confidence (or, "faith") in God to move in that direction? Can you imagine a newness of life that God might be promising you if you turn in this new direction? If not, why not?