

The Book of Romans, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Abraham Justified by Faith

Romans 4:1-25

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Romans 4 is Paul's extended proof, from the life of Abraham, that justification has always been by grace through faith and never by works of merit. A great deal is at stake doctrinally. Paul shows that righteousness was counted to Abraham as a gift, not earned as a wage; that the same blessing is described by David as the non-counting of sin; that Abraham was justified before circumcision, so the outward sign sealed a righteousness already received by faith; that the promise rests on grace so it can be guaranteed to all who believe; and that justifying faith is a strong, God-glorifying confidence in God's promise. The teacher should be ready to explain what it means that righteousness is counted or credited to faith, and to do so without falling into the error of treating faith as a mere mental assent.

This lesson must keep the same careful balance as the previous one. Abraham was justified by grace through faith, not by works of merit or law-keeping done to earn a standing and to boast. That is Paul's clear point, and it must not be softened. At the same time, Abraham's faith was a living, obedient faith. It was the kind of faith that left Ur at God's command, that walked with God for decades, and that, when tested, was willing to offer up Isaac. James points to that very moment and says Abraham was justified by works when he offered his son, that faith was active along with his works, and that faith was completed by his works, concluding that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:21-24). There is no contradiction between Paul and James. Paul excludes works of merit that would earn salvation and produce boasting; James excludes a dead faith that never obeys. The faith Paul commends in Abraham is exactly the living, obedient faith James describes. The teacher should hold these together and avoid any drift toward faith only language.

This chapter is also richly formative. Abraham models the trust we are all called to: hoping against hope, giving glory to God before the outcome is seen, growing strong in faith through long delay. The teacher should help students see themselves as children of Abraham by faith, called to the same patient, God-honoring trust, and to rest in the forgiveness Paul describes, the deep blessing of sins covered and not counted. The disciple being formed here is a person who has stopped trying to earn from God like a laborer and has learned to trust Him like a child, with a faith that obeys.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul cites Genesis: Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness (v. 3), and explains that to the one who works, wages are not counted as a gift but as a due, while to the one who does not work but trusts God, his faith is counted as righteousness (vv. 4–5). What does it mean that righteousness was counted or credited to Abraham, and why does Paul insist this was a gift received by faith rather than a wage earned by works?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the single sentence on which the chapter turns: Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness (v. 3, quoting Genesis 15:6). The teacher should help students feel the weight of the word counted (also translated credited or reckoned). It is an accounting term: righteousness was placed to Abraham's account, not because he had earned it, but because he trusted God.

Unfold Paul's wage-and-gift contrast. When a worker earns wages, the pay is his due; the employer owes it to him. But Abraham did not put God in his debt. He came trusting a promise, and God credited that faith as righteousness. The whole transaction is in the category of gift, not payment. This is Paul's way of showing that justification cannot be earned without ceasing to be grace.

Clarify what counted righteousness does and does not mean. It does not mean God pretended Abraham was sinless or that the crediting was a legal fiction with no reality. It means God graciously reckoned Abraham to be in right standing on the basis of his faith, not his record. The righteousness is real because the relationship of trust is real and because God Himself supplies what we lack in Christ.

Apply it. The teacher should help students see that this is the only way any sinner can ever be right with God: not by presenting a record good enough to deserve acceptance, but by trusting God and receiving righteousness as a gift. Abraham is the pattern. We come, as he did, with empty hands and a believing heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Righteousness counted or credited to faith as a gift (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3)
- The wage-and-gift contrast, salvation cannot be earned without ceasing to be grace
- Credited righteousness as real, not a mere legal fiction
- Faith as the empty hand that receives, not a work that earns

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that righteousness was counted or credited to Abraham?
- Why does Paul insist this was a gift and not a wage?
- How is Abraham the pattern for the way any sinner is made right with God?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul contrasts the worker who earns wages with the believer who receives a gift (vv. 4–5). In your relationship with God, do you more often feel like an employee anxiously earning your keep, or like a child receiving a gift? What in your life reveals which of these you actually believe, and how might you move toward resting in grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes Paul's worker-versus-child contrast and presses it into the student's experience of God. The teacher should help students discern which posture actually governs their daily walk.

Describe the employee mentality. Many believers relate to God as anxious employees: keeping a mental ledger of performance, fearing they have not done enough, feeling secure on good days and rejected on bad ones, trying to earn what God has already given. This is exhausting and joyless, and it quietly denies the gospel.

Describe the child mentality. The believer who grasps grace relates to God as a beloved child receiving a gift. Their security rests on the Father's love and Christ's work, not on their performance. This does not make them lazy; secure children actually serve more freely and joyfully than anxious employees.

Help students discern which they believe by examining the evidence: How do they feel after a spiritual failure? Do they serve out of joy or obligation? Can they rest, or must they always be proving themselves? The aim is to move them, in one concrete way this week, from earning toward receiving, from the treadmill toward the embrace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The employee mentality versus the child mentality before God
- Security grounded in the Father's love and Christ's work, not performance
- Grace as the end of the performance treadmill
- Joyful service flowing from secure sonship

Discussion Prompts

- Do you relate to God more like an anxious employee or a secure child?
- What in your life reveals which of these you actually believe?
- What is one way you can move from earning toward receiving this week?

Question 3**Student Question:**

Paul quotes David to describe the same blessing: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin (vv. 6–8). What does it mean that God will not count our sin against us, and how does this picture of forgiveness deepen our understanding of what it is to be justified?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul reinforces his point with David's words: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin (vv. 7–8, quoting Psalm 32). The teacher should note how Paul links justification with forgiveness. To be counted righteous is, from another angle, to have one's sins not counted against us.

Unfold the three pictures of forgiveness in David's words. Sins forgiven, lifted off and sent away; sins covered, no longer exposed to view; sin not counted, removed from the ledger. Each image shows a different facet of the same mercy. God deals with our guilt thoroughly, not partially.

Stress the wonder of not counting. God keeps perfect accounts; He misses nothing. And yet, for the one who trusts Him, He chooses not to count their sin against them. This is not because the debt did not exist but because, as the next chapters will show, it was paid by Another. The non-counting of our sin is possible only because Christ bore it.

Apply it to assurance. Many believers know they are forgiven in theory but live as though the debt were still on the books. The teacher can help students rest in the completeness of God's forgiveness, the blessing David calls being truly blessed, and let that settled mercy free them from the haunting weight of guilt.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification as the non-counting of sin (Psalm 32; Romans 4:7–8)
- The three pictures of forgiveness, sins forgiven, covered, and not counted
- The thoroughness of God's forgiveness for those who trust Him
- The non-counting of sin made possible by Christ bearing it

Discussion Prompts

- What do the words forgiven, covered, and not counted each add to our picture of forgiveness?
- How can God, who misses nothing, choose not to count our sin?
- What would change if you truly rested in the completeness of God's forgiveness?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul describes the deep blessing of being a person whose sins God does not count against them (vv. 7–8). Do you live day to day as someone whose sins are truly forgiven and not counted, or do you still carry the weight of guilt as though the debt were unpaid? What would change if you really believed your sins were covered?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses David's blessing into the student's daily experience of guilt and assurance. The aim is to close the gap between what we believe about forgiveness and how we actually live.

Name the problem of carried guilt. Many sincere believers continue to drag the weight of confessed and forgiven sins, replaying old failures, doubting whether God has really let them go, serving from a place of perpetual debt. This is not humility; it is a quiet refusal to believe the gospel fully.

Distinguish conviction from condemnation. Healthy conviction leads us to confess and turn, then releases us into forgiveness. Condemnation keeps accusing after we have repented, dragging us back to a debt God has already cancelled. Learning to tell the difference frees the conscience.

Move toward assurance. Encourage students to take God at His word: the sins they have confessed are forgiven, covered, and not counted. The proper response to that mercy is not perpetual guilt but grateful obedience. Invite them to name one old guilt they have been carrying and to lay it down where Christ already carried it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living in the reality of forgiveness, not under carried guilt
- The difference between conviction (which frees) and condemnation (which accuses)
- Assurance grounded in God's word about our forgiveness
- Gratitude, not perpetual guilt, as the response to mercy

Discussion Prompts

- Do you live as someone whose sins are truly not counted, or do you still carry the debt?
- How can you tell the difference between conviction and condemnation?
- What old guilt might God be inviting you to lay down this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul points out that Abraham was counted righteous by faith before he was circumcised, so that circumcision was a sign and seal of a righteousness he already had by faith, making him the father of all who believe (vv. 9–12). Why does the order of events matter here, and what does it teach us about the relationship between faith and the outward signs God appoints?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a pointed observation about timing: Abraham was counted righteous in Genesis 15, before he was circumcised in Genesis 17. Therefore circumcision was a sign and seal of a righteousness he already had by faith (vv. 9–11). The teacher should help students see why Paul cares so much about this sequence.

Explain Paul's purpose. He is showing that Abraham is the father of all who believe, both the uncircumcised (Gentiles) and the circumcised (Jews) who walk in his faith. Because Abraham was justified by faith before receiving the outward sign, the blessing cannot be tied to the sign alone. Faith, not nationality or ritual, is what unites a person to Abraham.

Draw the careful application about faith and outward signs. A sign or seal that God appoints is not empty; circumcision was a genuine command and seal of the covenant. But the sign points to and seals a reality of faith; it is not a substitute for it. God has always wanted the believing heart, with the obedient response that expresses it, never the mere ritual by itself.

Use this to teach balance, looking ahead to baptism in Romans 6. Some traditions, reacting against ritualism, treat outward acts as meaningless. Others treat the act as automatic, apart from faith. Abraham shows the better way: real faith joined to the God-appointed sign. When we come to baptism, we will see the same pattern, an obedient faith expressed in the act God appointed, never a bare ritual and never a faith too proud to obey.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Abraham justified by faith before circumcision (Romans 4:9–11)
- Outward signs as seals of a reality received by faith, not substitutes for it
- Faith, not ritual or nationality, as what unites us to Abraham
- Avoiding both empty ritualism and the neglect of God-appointed signs (preparing for baptism in Romans 6)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the order, faith first and then circumcision, matter to Paul's argument?
- What is the right relationship between faith and the outward signs God appoints?
- How does Abraham's example help us think rightly about baptism?

Question 6

Student Question:

Abraham trusted God's promise of a son for decades, through long delay and apparent impossibility, without abandoning his confidence in God. When God's promises seem slow to arrive in your life, how do you tend to respond? What helps you keep trusting through the waiting rather than giving up?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question draws on the decades of waiting that Abraham endured between the promise and its fulfillment. The teacher should help students connect Abraham's long delay to their own seasons of waiting on God.

Acknowledge how hard waiting is. Abraham waited some twenty-five years for the promised son. In that time he stumbled (the episode with Hagar) yet ultimately held on. Most believers know the particular ache of a promise that seems slow: a prayer long unanswered, a hope deferred, a situation that will not change on our timetable.

Explore common responses to delay. Some grow bitter and conclude God has forgotten them. Some take matters into their own hands, as Abraham did with Hagar, manufacturing a substitute for what God promised. Some quietly give up. Naming these tendencies helps students recognize their own.

Offer what sustains faith through waiting. Abraham grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God (v. 20). Trust is sustained by fixing on God's character and track record rather than on the visible circumstances, by remembering past faithfulness, by the support of God's people, and by continued obedience while we wait. Invite students to name the specific waiting they are in and one way to keep trusting through it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith that perseveres through long delay (Abraham's twenty-five years)
- The temptation to manufacture substitutes for God's promise (Hagar)
- Trusting God's character rather than visible circumstances
- Giving glory to God as the strengthener of faith in waiting

Discussion Prompts

- How do you tend to respond when God's promises seem slow to arrive?
- Where are you tempted to take matters into your own hands rather than wait on God?
- What helps you keep trusting God through a long season of waiting?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul argues that the promise to Abraham and his offspring came not through the law but through the righteousness of faith, so that the promise rests on grace and is therefore guaranteed to all who share Abraham's faith (vv. 13–17). Why does Paul say that if the inheritance came by law-keeping the promise would be void, and how does resting the promise on grace make it secure for everyone who believes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul argues that the promise to Abraham came through the righteousness of faith, not through the law, because if those who live by the law are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void (vv. 13–14). The teacher should help students follow this logic, which guards the security of the promise.

Explain why law-keeping would void the promise. If the inheritance depended on perfectly keeping the law, then no one would ever receive it, because no one keeps the law perfectly. A promise conditioned on flawless performance is a promise no sinner can ever claim. It would collapse under the weight of human failure.

Show why grace makes the promise secure. Paul says the promise rests on grace so that it may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring, to all who share his faith (v. 16). Because the promise depends on God's gift rather than our achievement, it is sure. Grace does not fluctuate with our performance; it rests on the faithfulness of the God who gives it.

Apply it to assurance and inclusion. This means the promise is open to everyone who believes, Jew and Gentile alike, and that it is secure for those who rest in it. The teacher can help students feel the relief of a salvation that does not hang by the thread of their own consistency but is held firmly by the grace of a faithful God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The promise resting on grace through faith, not on law-keeping (4:13–16)
- Why a promise conditioned on perfect law-keeping would be void
- Grace as the guarantee that secures the promise for all who believe
- The inclusion of all, Jew and Gentile, who share Abraham's faith

Discussion Prompts

- Why would the promise be void if it depended on keeping the law?
- How does resting the promise on grace make it secure?
- What relief does it bring that your salvation rests on God's faithfulness rather than your consistency?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul says Abraham hoped against hope and grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God (vv. 18–20). Faith and giving glory to God are tied together here. Where do you need to give glory to God in the middle of an uncertain situation, trusting His character before you see the outcome? Name one specific area where you can choose trust this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question ties together two things Paul links: faith and giving glory to God. Abraham hoped against hope and grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God (vv. 18–20). The teacher should help students see that faith is, at its heart, honoring God by trusting His character.

Explain the connection. To give glory to God is to treat Him as the trustworthy, all-able, promise-keeping God He truly is. Unbelief, by contrast, quietly insults God by treating His promises as unreliable. So faith is not merely a feeling; it is a way of honoring God, declaring by our trust that He is worthy of confidence even before we see results.

Bring it into uncertain situations. We give glory to God most powerfully not when everything is clear but when we trust Him in the dark, choosing to rely on His character before the outcome is visible. This is hope against hope: believing the promise when the circumstances argue against it.

Make it concrete. Ask students to name one uncertain area, a decision, a fear, an unanswered prayer, where they can choose, this week, to give glory to God by trusting Him. The aim is an active, deliberate act of trust that honors God in the waiting, modeled on Abraham.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith as giving glory to God by trusting His character
- Unbelief as quietly dishonoring God's reliability
- Hope against hope, trusting the promise when circumstances argue against it
- Active, deliberate trust as a way of honoring God

Discussion Prompts

- How is trusting God a way of giving Him glory?
- Where do you most need to trust God's character before you see the outcome?
- What is one specific area where you can choose trust this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul says Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised, and that is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness; and these words were written for us also, who believe in Him who raised Jesus from the dead, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (vv. 21–25). What does this passage reveal about the nature of justifying faith, and how do we hold together the truth that Abraham was justified by grace through faith (not by works of merit) with the fact that his was a living, obedient faith that left home at God's word and was later shown genuine when he offered Isaac (as James 2:21–24 makes explicit), so that we never reduce it to a faith that stands alone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, and it completes the careful balance begun in the previous lesson. Paul says Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised, and that is why his faith was counted as righteousness (vv. 21-22). The teacher should use this to define the nature of justifying faith and to hold Paul and James together.

First, describe the faith Paul commends. It is not a vague wish or a bare mental nod. It is a strong, settled, God-glorifying conviction that God is able and will keep His word, a conviction so real that it shaped Abraham's whole life. This is the faith that justifies: trusting God enough to take Him at His word and act on it.

Second, show that this faith was obedient from the start. The faith Paul praises is the same faith that obeyed God's call to leave Ur (Genesis 12; Hebrews 11:8), that walked with God for decades, and that submitted to circumcision. Genuine trust in God expresses itself in obedience to God. Abraham's faith and Abraham's obedience were never two separate things; the obedience was faith in action.

Third, bring in James directly and resolve the apparent tension. James points to the climactic test, the offering of Isaac, and says Abraham was justified by works when he offered up his son, that faith was active along with his works, that faith was completed by his works, and he concludes that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:21-24). This does not contradict Paul. Paul excludes works of merit, law-keeping done to earn a standing and to boast. James excludes a dead, idle faith that never obeys. Both affirm the same thing positively: the faith that justifies is a living, working, obedient faith. Abraham believed God (Paul), and that belief proved itself genuine by obeying God even to the point of offering Isaac (James). Note again that Scripture uses the phrase faith alone only here in James, and only to deny it.

Finally, bring it home to us. Paul says these words were written for us also, who believe in Him who raised Jesus from the dead, delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (vv. 23-25). We are justified the same way Abraham was: by grace, through a living, obedient faith in the God who raised Jesus. So we must guard the same balance the whole study maintains. We are not saved by works of merit, and we are not saved by a faith that stands alone and never obeys. We are saved by grace, received through the obedience of faith, a faith that believes the promise, trusts the risen Christ, and follows Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justifying faith as a strong, settled, God-glorifying conviction (4:21)
- Abraham's faith as obedient from the start (Genesis 12; Hebrews 11:8)
- James 2:21-24, faith active with works, completed by works, justified not by faith alone
- The harmony of Paul and James, Paul excludes works of merit, James excludes dead faith
- Salvation by grace through a living, obedient faith, not by works of merit and not by faith alone

- Christ delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (4:25)

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of faith does Paul say was counted to Abraham as righteousness?
- How do Paul and James fit together on faith and works?
- How does Abraham's example keep us from both works-righteousness and a faith that never obeys?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this chapter. Paul has shown you Abraham justified by faith, the blessing of forgiven and uncounted sin, the promise secured by grace, and a faith that holds on to God against all odds. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Romans 4:1-25 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to look back across the chapter and name how Jesus is forming them through it. The teacher should gather the threads and help each person take one truth to heart.

Recall the journey: Abraham justified by faith and not by works, the blessing of sins forgiven and not counted, the promise secured by grace, faith that hopes against hope and gives glory to God, and a living, obedient faith that holds Paul and James together.

Encourage a single takeaway. For some it will be ceasing to relate to God as an anxious employee; for others, resting in the non-counting of their sin; for others, trusting a promise that circumstances seem to contradict; for others, embracing a faith that obeys rather than a faith that merely agrees.

Close by anchoring identity. Paul wants every believer to know they are a child of Abraham by faith, an heir of the promise, justified by the God who raised Jesus. The disciple being formed here is a person who trusts God like Abraham did, with empty hands and an obedient heart, and who lives in the security of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Believers as children of Abraham by faith (Galatians 3:7)
- The security of grace and the blessing of uncounted sin
- A living, obedient faith as the pattern for our own walk
- Spiritual formation grounded in trusting God's promise

Discussion Prompts

- Which single truth from Romans 4:1–25 most needs to shape your week?
- How does seeing yourself as a child of Abraham by faith change your identity?
- What would it look like to trust God this week the way Abraham did?