

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Counted as Righteousness: God's Covenant with Abram

Genesis 15

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the doctrinal heart of the early lessons, and it must be handled with both confidence and care. Genesis 15 contains one of the most important verses in all of Scripture, verse 6: "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Paul builds the argument of Romans 4 on this verse, using Abraham to teach that a person is justified by grace through faith, not by works of merit or law-keeping that would give grounds for boasting. The historical setting underlines the point: this crediting of righteousness came years before circumcision and centuries before the Law of Moses, so it cannot rest on law-keeping or ritual. Abram simply believed God, and God reckoned him righteous. Teach this grace clearly; many believers labor under a quiet conviction that they must earn God's acceptance, and they need to hear that righteousness is credited, not achieved.

At the same time, this lesson must not become a "faith only" message, and the teacher should be ready to guard that boundary, especially at Question 9. The very faith that was counted as righteousness in Genesis 15 was the same living, obedient trust that had already moved Abram to leave Haran and would later move him to offer Isaac. James points to this same Abraham and says his faith was "active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works" (James 2:22), a theme Lesson 11 will develop fully. The consistent teaching of this study, and of Scripture, is justification by grace through an obedient faith: not a righteousness earned by our merit, and not a bare faith that believes and does nothing, but a living trust that takes God at His word and obeys Him. Hold both truths together without collapsing either one.

The covenant ceremony at the end of the chapter is a treasure for the teacher. God has Abram cut the animals, and then God alone passes between the pieces, taking the covenant obligation entirely on Himself. This unilateral, self-binding oath grounds the believer's assurance not in his own performance but in God's sworn faithfulness, and it quietly foreshadows the cross, where God Himself would bear the curse to keep His promise (compare Galatians 3:13–14). Aim, finally, at the heart: lead students to rest in credited righteousness rather than self-justification, while embracing the obedient faith through which that grace is received.

Question 1

Student Question:

God's first words to Abram in this chapter are, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (v. 1), spoken before any mention of a child or the land. What does it reveal

about God, and about the nature of true faith, that He offers Abram Himself as both security and reward before He gives any of His gifts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the timing of God's words. Before God addresses the thing Abram most wants, a child, He addresses Abram's fear and offers Himself: I am your shield, I am your reward. God gives the Giver before He gives the gift. This is the deepest comfort available to any believer: the highest blessing is not what God hands us but God Himself.

Unpack the two images. As shield, God is Abram's protection and security; Abram need not fear, because God stands between him and every threat. As reward, God is Abram's treasure and prize; whatever Abram gave up in leaving Haran or refusing Sodom's riches, God Himself is the recompense. Security and satisfaction are both found in God, not in circumstances.

Draw out what this says about true faith. Faith is not chiefly a tool for getting things from God; it is a relationship of trust in God Himself. Mature faith can say, with the psalmist, "whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:25). The gifts are real and good, but they are not the point; God is the point.

Apply it honestly. Much of our prayer life is gift-focused: give me this, fix that, provide here. None of that is wrong, but it can mask a heart that wants God's hand more than God's face. This question gently exposes whether we treasure God or merely His benefits, and sets up the personal question that follows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God gives Himself before He gives His gifts
- God as both shield (security) and reward (treasure)
- Faith as a relationship of trust in God, not merely a means to blessings
- Treasuring God Himself above His benefits (Psalm 73:25)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God address Abram's fear and offer Himself before mentioning a child?
- What is the difference between wanting God's gifts and wanting God?
- How would your prayers change if God Himself were your great reward?

Question 2

Student Question:

It is easy to pursue the blessings of God while overlooking God Himself. In what ways do you find yourself wanting what God can give you (comfort, provision, answered prayers) more than you want God? What would change if He, and not His gifts, were your greatest treasure?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Make the diagnosis personal and gentle. Almost all of us pray more about God's gifts than we commune with God Himself. Help the class see this not as gross sin but as a subtle misordering of the heart that quietly starves our relationship with God.

Offer a simple test. If God answered every request on our prayer list but we never grew closer to Him, would we be satisfied? If the honest answer is yes, then we are seeking gifts more than the Giver. The aim is awareness, not condemnation.

Point toward what changes. When God Himself is the treasure, disappointment with circumstances loses its power to crush us, because we still have the one thing we most need. Invite each person to name one way they will seek God Himself this week, not just His help, perhaps in unhurried prayer, worship, or time in the Word with no agenda but to know Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The subtle misordering that prizes gifts over the Giver
- Testing our hearts: would God alone satisfy us?
- How treasuring God steadies us amid disappointing circumstances
- Seeking God Himself, not only His help

Discussion Prompts

- If God gave you everything you asked but not more of Himself, would you be content?
- Where are you most prone to want the gift more than the Giver?
- What is one way you could seek God Himself this week, not just His help?

Question 3

Student Question:

Abram answered God honestly with his long-deferred grief: "What will you give me, for I continue childless?" (vv. 2–3), and God responded not with rebuke but with the stars and a renewed promise (vv. 4–5). What does this exchange teach about bringing honest doubt to God, and about how God strengthens faith through His word and His promise?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Note the honesty of Abram's prayer. He does not pretend everything is fine. He lays his disappointment before God plainly, even pointedly. This is not unbelief; it is faith wrestling. The believer who brings his real questions to God is in a far better place than the one who buries them behind a forced smile.

Mark God's gracious response. He does not scold Abram for asking; He answers. He takes him outside, gives him the stars to look at, and renews the promise in a vivid, faith-strengthening

way. God meets honest doubt with patient revelation. He is not fragile, and He is not offended by the prayers of a struggling believer.

Draw out how God strengthens faith. Faith does not grow by being scolded into existence; it grows as God's word and promise are brought before it. The stars were a tangible preaching of the promise to Abram's eyes. For us, faith is strengthened the same way, by returning again and again to what God has actually said and sworn, especially in Scripture and in the gospel of Christ.

Caution the class about the difference between honest wrestling and hardened unbelief. Abram brought his doubt to God and let God answer; that is the path faith should take. The danger is not honest questions but questions we nurse in the dark and away from God, which curdle into cynicism. Bring the doubt into the light of God's presence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest lament and questioning as an act of faith, not unbelief
- God's patience with the struggling believer
- Faith strengthened by God's word and promise, not by scolding
- The difference between honest wrestling and nursed, hardened doubt

Discussion Prompts

- Why is honest lament before God healthier than a forced smile?
- How does dwelling on God's actual promises strengthen weak faith?
- What turns honest doubt into hardened cynicism, and how do we avoid it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Abram did not hide his disappointment or let it quietly poison his trust; he brought it to God. What hard question, unanswered prayer, or buried disappointment have you been keeping at a distance from God? How might honestly bringing it to Him actually strengthen your faith rather than weaken it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Invite real honesty here. Many believers carry a hidden grief or a long-unanswered prayer that they have stopped mentioning to God, sometimes out of resignation, sometimes out of fear that voicing it would expose unbelief. Help the class identify their own, even if only privately.

Reassure them from the text. God did not love Abram less for his honesty; He drew near. The Psalms are full of believers pouring out raw complaint and emerging with renewed trust. Bringing our disappointment to God is not a failure of faith; it is faith refusing to deal with God at a distance.

Show the path from honesty to strengthened faith. When we bring the buried thing into God's presence, we open it to His comfort, His perspective, and His promises. Faith grows not by avoiding the hard question but by holding it up to God and hearing Him speak. Encourage one honest prayer this week about the very thing they have been avoiding.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hidden grief and unanswered prayer kept at a distance from God
- Honest prayer as faith dealing directly with God
- The Psalms as a model of lament that leads to renewed trust
- Faith strengthened by bringing the buried thing into God's presence

Discussion Prompts

- What disappointment have you stopped bringing to God?
- What are you afraid would happen if you prayed about it honestly?
- How could one honest prayer this week begin to strengthen your faith?

Question 5

Student Question:

Genesis 15:6 says, "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness," a verse Paul builds upon in Romans 4:1–5. What does it mean that righteousness was credited, or counted, to Abram through faith rather than earned, and why does Paul insist this leaves no room for boasting in our own works of merit or law-keeping?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Slow down, because this is one of the most important verses in the Bible. The word "counted" (also translated "credited" or "reckoned") is an accounting term. God placed righteousness to Abram's account. Abram did not generate it or earn it; he believed God, and God credited him with a right standing he did not possess on his own. This is grace in its purest form.

Bring in Paul's argument from Romans 4:1–5. Paul reasons that if Abraham had been justified by works, he would have had something to boast about, but Scripture says he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. To the one who works, Paul says, the wage is counted as a debt owed, not a gift; but to the one who trusts God, faith is counted as righteousness as a gift of grace. Salvation, at its root, is never God paying us what we have earned; it is God crediting what we could never earn.

Underline the timing, as Paul does. This crediting happened in Genesis 15, long before Abram was circumcised (Genesis 17) and centuries before the Law of Moses. So Abram's righteousness could not have rested on circumcision, ritual, or law-keeping. This dismantles every system that

tries to earn a standing before God by accumulating merit. We are accepted by grace through faith, not by piling up good works to put God in our debt.

Guard the truth precisely here, because this verse is often misused. To say righteousness is credited by grace through faith, and not earned by works of merit or law, is exactly right. But Paul is excluding works of merit that would let a person boast and treat God as a debtor; he is not teaching that the faith which receives this grace is a do-nothing faith. That distinction is the subject of Question 9, and the teacher should plant it here but develop it there. For now, let the grace land fully: your standing with God is a gift, received by trusting Him, never a wage you must earn.

Apply it to the weary. Many believers live as though God's acceptance must be re-earned every day by their performance, and they are exhausted and afraid. Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4 are good news for them: the righteousness that counts before God is credited to faith, not achieved by effort. That truth, rightly held, produces not laziness but grateful, wholehearted devotion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “Counted” as an accounting term: righteousness credited, not earned
- Romans 4:1–5, the worker's wage versus the believer's gift
- Righteousness credited before circumcision and before the Law (no room for ritual merit)
- Grace excludes boasting and treating God as a debtor
- Distinguishing the exclusion of works of merit from any denial of obedient faith (set up for Question 9)
- Freedom from the treadmill of re-earning God's acceptance

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that righteousness was “credited” rather than earned?
- Why does Paul say this leaves no room for boasting?
- Why does the timing (before circumcision and the Law) matter so much to Paul's argument?

Question 6

Student Question:

If a right standing with God is credited by grace through faith and not earned by our performance, where are you still tempted to try to earn God's acceptance, to justify yourself by your record, or to measure your standing by how well you have done? How does the gospel of credited righteousness free you from that treadmill?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Name the performance treadmill, because most believers know it. We slip into measuring our standing with God by how the day went: prayed enough, sinned little, served much, so God

must be pleased; failed today, so God must be distant. This is justification by performance, and it is exhausting and unstable.

Set the gospel against it. If righteousness is credited to faith by grace, then our standing does not rise and fall with our record. We are accepted in Christ, not in our performance. This does not make obedience optional (Question 9 will address that), but it does pull the foundation of our acceptance off our shoulders and place it on God's grace.

Help them locate the specific form their self-justification takes: comparing themselves to others, keeping a mental ledger, basing their sense of God's nearness on their feelings or their week. Then invite them to rest, deliberately, in credited righteousness, and to let gratitude rather than fear drive their obedience this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The performance treadmill of justification by works
- Acceptance grounded in Christ, not in our daily record
- Self-justification through comparison and mental ledgers
- Gratitude, not fear, as the motive for obedience

Discussion Prompts

- How do you tend to measure whether God is pleased with you?
- Where are you still trying to earn an acceptance that is already given by grace?
- How would resting in credited righteousness change your week?

Question 7

Student Question:

When Abram asked, "How am I to know?" (v. 8), God answered by cutting a covenant, and as darkness fell, He alone passed between the pieces in the smoking fire pot and flaming torch (vv. 9–21). Why is it significant that God bound Himself by oath and passed through alone, and how does this self-binding covenant give the believer assurance and even foreshadow the cross of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Explain the ancient ceremony so the scene makes sense. To "cut" a covenant, the parties would divide animals and walk together between the pieces, invoking on themselves the fate of those animals if they broke their word. It was a self-maledictory oath: may I be torn apart like this if I fail to keep covenant.

Now mark the astonishing detail. Abram does not walk the path. God alone, in the symbols of the smoking fire pot and flaming torch, passes between the pieces, while Abram lies in a deep

sleep. God takes the entire covenant obligation on Himself. The promise rests wholly on God's faithfulness, not on Abram's ability to keep his end.

Draw the assurance from this. Because the covenant depends on God's sworn word and not on our performance, it cannot finally fail for lack of our worthiness. Hebrews 6:17–18 says God confirmed His promise with an oath so that we might have strong encouragement. Our confidence is anchored outside ourselves, in the unbreakable word of God.

Lead the class reverently to the cross. God passed through alone, taking the curse upon Himself, and at Calvary God in Christ literally bore the curse to secure the promise (Galatians 3:13–14). The God who would one day not spare His own Son was, on this dark night, already binding Himself by blood to keep His word. The covenant of Genesis 15 finds its deepest meaning in the cross. Let this stir worship, not just understanding.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ancient covenant ceremony as a self-maledictory oath
- God passing through alone, taking the obligation on Himself
- Assurance grounded in God's sworn word, not our performance (Hebrews 6:17–18)
- The covenant foreshadowing the cross, where God bore the curse (Galatians 3:13–14)
- Worship as the response to God's self-binding faithfulness

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it so significant that God passed between the pieces alone?
- How does a covenant resting on God's oath give us assurance?
- How does this dark night point forward to the cross?

Question 8

Student Question:

God anchored Abram's assurance not in Abram's feelings or performance but in His own sworn promise. When your assurance wavers, do you tend to look inward at your feelings and your record, or outward to what God has promised and sworn in Christ? Where do you most need to rest in God's promise rather than your performance this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Diagnose where we look when assurance falters. Many believers, when they doubt their standing, turn inward, scanning their feelings and their recent performance for evidence that God still accepts them. Because feelings shift and performance is uneven, this produces a faith that rides an endless roller coaster.

Redirect the gaze outward. Abram's assurance rested on God's sworn promise, not on his own stellar track record (which, as Lesson 2 showed, was not stellar). For us, assurance rests on what God has promised and accomplished in Christ. When we look to the cross and the promises of God rather than to our fluctuating hearts, our confidence finds solid ground.

Make it practical. Encourage the class to identify the specific area where their assurance wavers, and to counter it not with "try harder" but with "God has promised." Suggest they anchor themselves in particular promises of God this week and preach those promises to their own doubting hearts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Where we look when assurance falters: inward feelings or outward promise
- The instability of assurance based on feelings and performance
- Anchoring confidence in God's promise and Christ's work
- Preaching God's promises to our own doubting hearts

Discussion Prompts

- When you doubt your standing with God, where do you instinctively look?
- Why is assurance based on feelings so unstable?
- Which promise of God do you most need to rest in this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Genesis 15:6 is one of the most important verses on faith in the Bible, but it must be read rightly. The same Abram whose faith was counted as righteousness here is the man whose faith led him to leave Haran and would later lead him to offer Isaac, the man James points to when he says faith was "completed by his works" (James 2:22). How do we hold together the truth that Abram was justified by grace through faith and not by works of merit, and the truth that the faith which justified him was a living, obedient trust, never a faith that merely believed and did nothing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it guards a truth at the center of the whole study. Begin by holding both halves firmly. First: Abram was justified by grace through faith, not by works of merit or law-keeping. Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4 settle that, and the teacher should never blur it. Salvation is a gift; no one earns a standing before God.

Second, and equally firmly: the faith that justified Abram was never a bare, do-nothing faith. It was a living trust that obeyed. The same chapter that says "he believed the LORD" describes a man who had already left his country at God's command and who would later, at God's command, raise the knife over his own son. James points to that very obedience and says

Abraham's faith was "active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works" (James 2:22), concluding that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24). The Bible itself, then, denies that we are saved by faith only.

Show the class that Paul and James are not at war; they are answering different errors with the same Abraham. Paul excludes works of merit and law-keeping that would earn salvation and let a person boast and treat God as a debtor. James excludes a dead, workless faith that claims to believe but never obeys. Put them together and you have the consistent teaching of Scripture and of this study: justification is by grace through a living, obedient faith. Not by earning, and not by a faith that stands alone. (Lesson 11 will develop this harmony in full from James 2; here the goal is simply to read Genesis 15:6 without distorting it.)

Apply the distinction carefully. Abram's obedience did not earn his righteousness; it expressed and completed the faith through which God credited him righteous. Likewise, our obedience does not purchase salvation, as if God owed us; rather, genuine saving faith necessarily acts, trusts, and obeys, because faith that does not obey is not the living faith the Bible describes. To say we are saved by faith and then to imagine that faith can be real while refusing to obey is to describe a faith Abraham never had and James explicitly denies.

Bring it to the gospel this study consistently teaches. We are saved by grace, through a faith that hears the gospel, trusts in Jesus as Lord and Christ, turns from sin, confesses Him, and is baptized into Him, and then walks faithfully with Him. That is not earning salvation; it is the obedient faith through which God graciously gives it, the same kind of trusting, obeying faith for which Abram is called the father of the faithful. Be ready to state this plainly and warmly, and to correct, gently, any notion that Genesis 15:6 teaches salvation by faith only.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification by grace through faith, not by works of merit or law (Romans 4:1–5)
- The justifying faith as a living, obedient trust, never a do-nothing faith
- James 2:22–24, faith completed by works and the denial of "faith alone"
- Paul and James in harmony: excluding merit-works versus excluding dead faith
- Obedience as the expression and completion of faith, not the purchase of salvation
- The gospel of grace received through an obedient faith (the consistent teaching of these studies)
- Reading Genesis 15:6 without turning it into a "faith only" message

Discussion Prompts

- How can we affirm grace through faith and still deny salvation by faith only?
- What error is Paul answering, and what different error is James answering?
- Why is it accurate to say Abram's obedience expressed his faith rather than earned his righteousness?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this chapter. You have seen God give Himself as Abram's reward, meet honest doubt with patient promise, credit righteousness to a believing heart, and bind Himself by a blood covenant to keep His word. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this part of Abram's story. What is the single truth about faith, grace, or God's faithfulness that you most need to carry into this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Gather the chapter's riches and press for one specific takeaway. Some need to stop earning and rest in credited righteousness; some need to bring an honest doubt to God; some need to treasure God Himself above His gifts; some need to anchor wavering assurance in God's sworn word. Let each name their own.

Lead them to Christ. The righteousness credited to Abram by faith is, for us, the righteousness of Christ received by a faith that trusts and obeys Him. The covenant God sealed in the dark of Genesis 15 was sealed in full at the cross. Being formed by this chapter means learning to live as one who is accepted by grace and therefore freed to obey out of love rather than fear.

Close with assurance and worship. The God who bound Himself by oath to Abram has bound Himself to us in Christ. The class can carry into the week a settled confidence that does not rest on their performance but on God's faithfulness, expressed in a grateful, obedient walk.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from grace understood to grace lived
- Credited righteousness fulfilled in the righteousness of Christ received by faith
- Obedience flowing from grateful acceptance rather than fear
- Settled assurance grounded in God's faithfulness

Discussion Prompts

- What single truth from this chapter do you most need this week?
- How does resting in God's grace free you to obey out of love?
- Where is Jesus calling you to trust God's faithfulness rather than your performance?