

Credited to Us

^{CEB} **Genesis 17:1 – 5** When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk with me and be trustworthy. ² I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants." ³ Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, ⁴ "But me, my covenant is with you; you will be the ancestor of many nations. ⁵ And because I have made you the ancestor of many nations, your name will no longer be Abram but Abraham.

Romans 4:13-25 CEB The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. ¹⁴ If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. ¹⁵ The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. ¹⁶ That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us. ¹⁷ As it is written: I have appointed you to be the father of many nations. So Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence. ¹⁸ When it was beyond hope, he had faith in the hope that he would become the father of many nations, in keeping with the promise God spoke to him: That's how many descendants you will have. ¹⁹ Without losing faith, Abraham, who was nearly 100 years old, took into account his own body, which was as good as dead, and Sarah's womb, which was dead. ²⁰ He didn't hesitate with a lack of faith in God's promise, but he grew strong in faith and gave glory to God. ²¹ He was fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised. ²² Therefore, it was credited to him as righteousness. ²³ But the scripture that says it was credited to him wasn't written only for Abraham's sake. ²⁴ It was written also for our sake, because it is going to be credited to us too. It will be credited to those of us who have faith in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵ He was handed over because of our mistakes, and he was raised to meet the requirements of righteousness for us.

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Two weeks ago we explored the covenant that God made with Noah. We saw that God promised to never again destroy all humanity and all of the animals. The covenant was unilateral – God initiated and gave the covenant entirely on his own. It was unconditional – it required nothing from Noah or any descendants. It was perpetual – it had no expiration date.

Today we will take note of another covenant, this one made with Abraham. Like the covenant with Noah, God initiates the covenant with Abraham. God's promise to Abraham is that he will be the ancestor of many nations. When I first read the first five verses in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis that was pretty much the extent of what I got out of the passage.

Paul, being the highly trained scholar of the Hebrew scripture that he was, saw far more in this passage. Paul declares that Abraham trusted God and it was counted, credited, imputed, or reckoned as righteousness. Paul is remembering a passage in the fifteen chapter of Genesis. Genesis 15:4-6 NIV, "Then the word of the LORD came to him: ' . . . a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.' ⁵ He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars--if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' ⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

Paul then considers how, when, and why Abraham was considered righteous. Paul breaks down his reasoning. Abraham lived long before the law was given to Moses at Mount Sinai, so Abraham wasn't justified, that is, judged as being righteous, on the basis of obedience

to a code of law that hadn't been given yet. Abraham was judged as righteous even before he and his household were circumcised.

Paul goes on to reason that because humans are fallible, they are unable to obey the law perfectly and completely. If justification depended on obedience to the law, all people would be condemned. But Paul remembers that the text in Genesis chapter fifteen says that since Abraham trusted God's promise of an heir, God considered Abraham to be righteous. So what does all of this have to do with us?

God's promise to Abraham in chapter seventeen is that he will be the ancestor of many nations. The word in Hebrew is *goyim*, which means nations, especially non-Jews. In Paul's letter, the Greek word is *ethnos*, which also indicates more than just the ethnic Jews. It could be translated as, "You will be the father of many ethnicities." Therefore Paul argues that the covenant with Abraham declares that he was destined to be the father of not just the Jews, but also the gentiles. Paul comes to the conclusion that Abraham's relationship with God reveals the real and continuous saving purposes of God with regard to all people. Since gentiles, by definition, are not bloodline descendants from Abraham, then how are we children of Abraham?

Just as George Washington is the father of our country, even though most of us are not blood descendants, so too, we gentiles are children of Abraham by our shared trust in the one true God. Only faith-righteousness could include both Jews and gentiles and therefore keep God's promise that Abraham would be the father of the gentiles as well as the Jews.

Rather than seeing ourselves as separate and different from the Jews, we should be claiming Abraham as our ancestor in the faith, just as he is for his blood descendants. He is father of us all. The family of Abraham isn't defined by law or blood, but by trust in God. This is what was intended all along, Paul declares.

Paul writes of God bringing life out of death. Abraham and Sarah were old and their powers of procreation were dead. But Abraham had trust. Despite his age and the state of his and Sarah's bodies, Abraham saw the situation as a prime opportunity for God – and God only – to create something out of nothing. And indeed, Isaac was born to them as promised. God brought life out of bodies whose ability to have children was dead. In a similar fashion, for us, Jesus was dead and buried and God raised him up to new life. Our trust in God's life-giving power is parallel to that of Abraham.

Paul is reminding us of God's sovereignty all through history, and of gentile indebtedness to Jewish heritage. Paul revisits this theme in chapters 9-11 and says, ". . . all Israel will be saved . . . God's gifts and calling can't be taken back." (Rom 11:26a, 29 CEB) God's promises are sure. God's covenant is for all time. It has a lifetime warranty – God's lifetime!

Paul speaks of righteousness that comes from faith, but we need to understand what faith really is. Faith in God is not just a matter of saying, "I believe there is a God." If you tell your son or daughter, "I have faith in you," you aren't saying, "I'm pretty certain that you exist." Faith is a matter of trusting in God.

This trust that is counted as righteousness doesn't waiver even when the visible reality seems to indicate that the trust looks foolish. This is trusting that God can fulfill a promise even to an old couple. Faith is trusting that Jesus' death wasn't the end of God's love and power. Trusting calls for us to believe that which is unbelievable, to trust God's call even when it goes against how we think the world works. We are challenged to love our unlovable neighbor, to forgive over and over and over, to trust God's goodness and God's wisdom over our own.

What about God's law? When we are completely honest with ourselves, we know that we constantly fall short of obeying God's laws. We keep wandering off the path that Christ

walked. We get distracted, tired, forgetful, angry, puffed up with our own self-importance and selfish interests. We worship cultural idols with our time and money and we chaff and rebel against God's call. Despite all that, God creates the unexpected: through sheer grace God maintains a loving relationship with us. For us, the only proper response is gratitude displayed as trust.

So again, what about all the rules? What about the commandments? How do they fit in, if trust in God is credited to us as righteousness? The purpose of the law is educational. It's the way that people come to realize what sin is and how to live in gratitude to God for what God has already done for us. The law is a blessing because it shows us how to live a grateful life, how to find our way back to the path when we lose our way, how to be in harmony with God, fellow peoples, and with all creation.

We often see our sinfulness as minor, certainly no big deal compared to the truly wicked folks we see on television crime shows and in the news. We figure, at most, a little touching up would really polish our image. But God knows us through and through, all we've done and left undone, the corners we've cut, our selfishness, pettiness, laziness, and thoughtlessness. Don't wallow in your trespasses, but at the same time, don't be casual about God's grace. In gratitude, live as obediently as possible. Live in confident trust that you are forgiven and you are given yet another chance to try to be obedient.

We will still mess up, but we can take comfort out of the fact that although Abraham was far from perfect, God was gracious and patient with him. God shows mercy where no mercy is deserved. (v 17) And we can trust God to be like that.

Trust in God's reliability and grace is the primary expectation that God has of us. God's action and initiative is central. God's promise that we will be his people comes first. When we put our trust in God, God credits it to us as righteousness. God does it all! Our God is an awesome God!

Trusting God begins our journey. When obedience fulfills faith, when it is the response of faith, it becomes the visible and concrete response built on trust. It is the outward sign, the manifestation of the invisible relationship of trust between God and us. This has been called the sacrament of our everyday life.

Jeff Paschal, commenting on today's passage in Romans, sums it up by saying, "Paul sees Abraham's faith as strong and unwavering, not because he never doubts, not because he never tries to take things in his own hands, but because Abraham actually *does* trust in God's promises [- trusts in them] enough to take risks and step out in faith. Maybe Paul lifts up the example of Abraham because, when God calls, Abraham walks his sinful, messy faith journey." (Jeff Paschal, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, p 67) Our own journeys of faith are just as messy and sinful. We dare not trust in our ability to be sinless. Instead, we are to live by trust in God's grace. If we focus on trying to be righteous by not making any mistakes, we will be spiritually immobilized by fear and failure. But trusting in God, we are called and challenged to step out in faith, being bold, confident, and taking risks, secure in the knowledge that our trust is credited to us as righteousness. Amen.

Don't wallow in guilt.
Be secure in the knowledge that
your trust is credited as righteousness.
In gratitude, live obediently.