

All About Abe

Romans 4:1-25

Key Verse: 4:3

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

Today, I want to tell you a story about a man named Abe. The Bible Club might know a little about him. They've been talking about him in their group discussions since the semester began. Abe was just an ordinary guy with no great ambitions or desires. In fact, his only real desire was to have a boy. Abe wanted to be a dad, but he and his wife were unable to conceive. Abe was close to his family. His dad's name was Terry and he had two brothers. One of his brothers Harry had died a while ago and Abe stepped up and took Harry's son Lot in to his house. Lot was just like a son to Abe. One day, when Abe was seventy-five years old and still didn't have a son, God told Abe to leave his father's home and go to a new place, one that God would show him. God gave him a promise that he would be the most blessed man in history with so much blessing that it would overflow to the whole world. God promised Abe, the man with no kids, that his descendants would be so numerous that they would become a nation. That's a heavy promise to a seventy-five year old man with no kids, but Abe took God at his word and left to go to some unknown place. Abe and his wife took Lot and all the servants that they had and went to a place called Canaan.

Canaan was a wild place. It was a beautiful location, but the people who were living there were, generally, not very savory. There were wild parties, child sacrifice, and guests to some towns were molested when they entered. When Abe moved to this region, he lived like a foreigner. He didn't adopt their customs and moved around from place to place. Abe became very successful in the region and so did Lot, but eventually a conflict arose between Abe and his nephew and they had to split. Lot became enticed by what the culture had to offer and eventually moved into the city where the molesters lived. While living in that area, Lot was taken captive by an invading force. The city refused to pay tribute to a king and that king brought an army against that city and its allies. The king ransacked the city and carted everything off, including Lot. When Abe heard about this, he gathered up all the men servants that he had, over 318, and went to rescue his nephew. Abe chased after the king on foot for over 200 miles, and he beat the king and his army with just a handful of men. Lot was safe, but when it was all over, he went back to the city from where he was taken. For all his victory, Abe was still childless. God's promise seemed a little hollow. At this time, God spoke to Abe again, "Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be." (Genesis 15:5) God renewed the promise and gave more detail to Abe, although it took another fifteen years for the promise to be fulfilled. When Abe was one hundred years old and his wife Sarah was ninety, she finally gave birth to a son, named Isaac. Abe wanted a son, but God promised that he would be a nation. Abe became the father of Isaac; Isaac was the father of Jacob and Jacob, also called Israel, became the father of twelve men, who would become the twelve tribes of Israel, of which Judah was one, and from the line of Judah came Jesus, the savior of the world.

God gave a promise to Abe and it took twenty-five years for the beginning of that promise to be seen. It took twenty-five years for Abe to get a son and nearly two thousand years for the blessing to the whole world to materialize. It wasn't an overnight process, Abe had to believe that what God promised would happen. Abe had to trust and have faith in God, there was no other way to make it through the twenty-five year wait and he didn't even know it was a twenty-five year wait. Abe's faith in God was so great that we refer to him as the father of faith and more than half of the world's population – over three and a half billion people – looks to Abe

as their ancestor of faith. So, when Paul started talking about righteousness from God that is by faith, someone would surely bring up, "What would Abe think about this?" Paul actually writes, "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God." (1-2) Abe was a great guy, he really trusted in God when God told him to do something. Leave his hometown and go to some unspecified place? Check! Even though he is seventy-five and his wife is sixty-five trust God to give him a son? Check! When the son does arrive, trust that God can bring him back when he says to sacrifice him on an altar? Check! That's some pretty heavy faith there. If there were ever a man that would be justified by his actions, it would be Abe, right?

A couple of weeks ago, we heard that there was no one who was righteous, not even one. Does that include Abe? Let's do a game of Last Man Standing with Abe. He's such a great guy, so he shouldn't have any trouble, right? Did Abe ever lie? Well, yes he did. There was this one time not long after he got to Canaan that the region had a famine, that is that the region didn't have enough food to support a family. Abe heard that there was plenty of food in Egypt, so he took his family there. When he entered Egypt, he became afraid because his wife was so beautiful and he thought that someone would kill him to get her. So, Abe lied and told people that she was his sister and not his wife. If lying wasn't bad enough, that lie let his wife get taken by the king of Egypt, the Pharaoh, to become one of his wives. Abe sold his wife for some food. I wouldn't call Abe righteous for that one. Okay, you might be thinking that Abe was young in his faith when that happened. After that incident, he learned his lesson and became a model citizen. I hate to tell it to you, but that's not true. Twenty-four years later, when Abe was ninety-nine years old, did nearly the same thing. He essentially sold his wife to ensure his own safety, again. Apparently, he didn't learn his lesson.

Abe, on his own, was not a righteous man. If you look at his life, you'll see that Abe was all jacked up, especially when left to his own devices. But, "What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" (3) Abe's righteousness did not come from something he did, but God credited to him. As the Bible says, "Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation." (4) When you work a job, you get paid either hourly or a salary. The work you do is directly proportional to the wage you earn. If you work harder, then you get more money. However, God's righteousness doesn't come to us this way. We've heard it before that we're not able to keep all of God's commands all the time. If you worked a job to keep a building safe, but everything was stolen except toilet paper, do you think that you would deserve your wages? You would probably lose your job because everything was stolen. It doesn't matter that the toilet paper was still there; everything else was gone! You didn't do your job! How often do we do that with God and his law? We keep one law really well, but we break all the rest on an hourly basis. Do we deserve praise for keeping the one law or condemnation for breaking all but one? We deserve condemnation and there is no way that we can be called righteous.

Thank God that we know from that last passage that we have Jesus who imparts on us his righteousness, if we believe. The Bible says, "However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness." (5) Righteousness is given to people who trust God. We have to trust that God really did send Jesus to justify us. We have to have faith in what Jesus did for us. In short, we have to trust what God promises, and then our faith is credited as righteousness.

Before I go further, I want to explain what the Bible means when it uses the word “credited”. Credit, nowadays, has this negative connotation. Many times when we think of credit, we think of debt. To us, credit is the little plastic cards that we were pre-approved for and had a low interest rate until you missed one payment and then the interest rose to 25%. To us, credit is this evil debt machine that chews up our lives, burdening us with uncertainty and sucking our money dry. To us, that is what credit means. The Bible is using a more original meaning, like from the world of accounting. Credit in accounting means an addition to an account, like a payment received for a business. When it says that Abe’s faith was credited to him as righteousness, it means that in God’s ledger, Abe’s faith is marked down as righteousness. God, the great accountant, gifted righteousness to Abe where there was faith, and the same holds for all who believe.

In this passage, Paul quotes something that King David wrote in one of the Psalms as the same thing as being credited righteousness. “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.’” (6-8) According to what David wrote, being credited with righteousness means that our transgressions are forgiven and our sins are covered. It means that our sin is not counted against us. We’ve heard it before that there will be a final day of judgment as we stand before God, and we will be held accountable for everything that we have done. God knows all the secret things that we have done and he will judge us on every single one of them. But how would you feel if, on that day, the evil things you did, just were forgotten and didn’t count against you? That’s what being credited with righteousness means. God gives us his righteousness to wipe out our sin.

Is the blessedness that David talks about only for a certain group of people? We are all sinners, but maybe some sinners have an opportunity to become righteous and others do not. The Bible says, “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.” (9) Circumcision was the mark of a man being a Jew and many times people thought being a Jew meant that you have certain special privileges. Paul already made a point that both Jews and Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, were both sinners. Maybe being a Jew gave you some special salvation. Maybe that circumcision said that when you were saved, you were now righteous. As Paul points out, Abe’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. This happened not after God told Abe to circumcise himself and his household, but before. God did not make Abe righteous after he obeyed. He made Abe righteous after he believed. The circumcision that Abe underwent was merely a sign of the righteousness that God imparted on him.

“So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. 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.” (11-12) What this means is that, in order, for our sins to be covered and our transgressions forgiven, we don’t have to belong to a special group of people. We don’t have to belong to the cross-around-the-neck, fish-on-the-car, blue-shirt-and-khaki, clean-cut club. We don’t have to fulfill some guidelines to be made righteous. Abe was made righteous by just believing what God promised. The Bible says, “Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.” (16)

Since Abe received righteousness because of his faith, God's promise is very important to know. Without remembering God's promise, Abe could never have faith and be credited with righteousness. The Bible says, "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.'" (18-22) Against all hope, Abe in hope believed what God promised. When all human hope seemed lost, Abe still had hope in God. Abe and his wife were old. Abe was nearly a hundred and Sarah was nearly ninety, and as Paul points out, in regard to having children, they were as good as dead. There was physically no way for them to have a kid, but Abe still believed that God could fulfill his promise. Abe figured that God had the power make two very senior citizens pregnant. Abe didn't know how or when it was going to happen, but he trusted that God could and would keep his promises no matter how far out they seem.

There were fifteen years from the time God renewed his promise to Abe to the time that his son Isaac was born. That's twenty-five years from the time God first called Abe and gave him the promise. Those long, hard years when Abe and Sarah weren't getting any younger weren't because God was struggling to make it happen. Abe was fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised. God made the world in seven days; surely he could make an elderly couple pregnant. He created people, nature, stars and the laws of physics. He created the womb and he could fill it even if it were old. There was all that time because God had a perfect plan that needed everything to happen in its time. God wanted Abe, in part, to have his faith strengthened before beginning to fulfill the promise. If God gave Abe a son quickly, then Abe probably wouldn't have developed such a close relationship with him. Abe would never have learned to trust God wholeheartedly. God's promise to Abe wasn't merely that he would have a son, but that he would be a father to many nations and that the whole earth would be blessed through him. God wanted to use Abe to help bring about the salvation of the world through Jesus. For that, Abe's heart needed a little tending.

We like to have things instantly and we are really used to it. With our technology, we have instant access to countless videos, music, and information. We have YouTube and iTunes on the phones in our pockets and the Internet at our fingertips. Everything that you could possibly want to know is accessible in just seconds, and those phones are getting faster when moving from 3G to 4G LTE. The newest wireless standard promises download speeds that are probably faster than your home network connection. I know that I hate waiting the three seconds for the page to load on 3G, but Abe waited twenty-five years. That would be unheard of to us. We call God a liar because he doesn't change our lives in a day, but Abe had to wait twenty-five years. That builds a lot of character and takes a lot of faith, but in the end Abe was justified by his faith in God and was credited righteousness.

I like how the Bible connects to us for us. How often does that happen to us in a Bible passage? The Bible says, "The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." (23-25) We, too, can be credited with righteousness if we believe in the promises that God has given us. You might be wondering why would we even want to be

righteous. It sounds so negative. As Bob said last week, being righteous means that you are right with God. It means that God knows you and actually has a relationship with you. You are his boy or you are his girl. When you are credited with righteousness, it's like going to a club and your name is on the guest list. It is not about what you have done, but whom you know. You know the owner of the club called Heaven and he has given you the pass to get into the party out of the goodness of his heart. And you know that God throws the best parties. But it is so much more than that. Verse 13 talks about Abe and his offspring being heir or the world. Not only are you now invited to the party, but you also inherit the club and the estate.

Inheriting God's kingdom is part of the promise that was given to Abe and extends to us who believe. First, we have this promise of salvation that comes through Jesus' death on the cross and subsequent rising from the dead. We have the promise from God that Jesus died for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. We don't have to worry whether or not this sin or that sin has been covered. Sometimes we think that what we have done is just unforgiveable, and that there is no hope for us, but God promises that Jesus' death on the cross covers even the most horrible sins. We heard last week about a man on the cross next to Jesus. He was a convicted thief and possibly a murderer, and yet, when he accepted what Jesus was doing for him, his sins were forgiven and he was invited into God's kingdom. It wasn't too late for him and his sin wasn't too great for God. The same holds for us. None of our sins, none of our problems, none of our issues are too great for God and the only time it is too late is when you are dead. God promises that you will be saved. There are no special requirements to salvation and justification, except that you believe what Jesus has done for you. It is so amazing!

The really great part is that God's promises extend into every part of our lives. It doesn't matter what mountains that we have in our lives, whether it is schoolwork, family issues, financial woes, job security, or whatever may be burdening you right now. Those mountains are nothing when compared to the love that God has for you. We don't have to be filled with fear and anxiety because God promises us that we don't have to be. God loves you so much that he sent his son to die for you. Does that mountain even have a chance against such love? A number of years ago I racked up so much debt that it is still kind of restricting now. I still struggle with the impulses that got me that debt, but there are days when my debt is a terrible burden to me that I brought into my marriage. I've burdened my wife and daughter with the fruit of my sin, but God has promised me that he wants to use my family and me for his great good. Plus, he promises that he provides. Despite the fact that we have financial struggles and sometimes we wonder how to pay the bills, God has never once allowed for us to starve or go cold. He has provided for us right when we needed it. It wasn't necessarily exactly how we envisioned, but he provides in the ways that we need and I can trust that God loves me because he provides for me and he saved me from my life of sin. I can have faith in God because he keeps his promises and is worthy of being someone who I can put my faith in.

God's promises don't end there, either. After Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended back into heaven, but God promised that Jesus would return. It has been nearly two thousand years since Jesus returned to the Father, but it took two thousand years for his promise to Abe to also be fulfilled. God had a specific plan that required two thousand years to fulfill, not because he is not powerful, but because humanity needed the time. In the same way, God has been working in the hearts of humanity to prepare us to meet him. It is taking us this long to prepare, not God, but God is faithful to us and patient with us. His promise is true and we can have faith in that.