

Session 5: Abraham Believed God

Romans 4 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers, by building Abraham's timeline themselves, that Scripture's model of justifying faith is a whole obedient life: believed and reckoned righteous before circumcision and before the law, a faith that set out when called, hoped against hope, grew strong, and was completed decades later on Moriah. Faith is not a moment of assent filed away; it is a life handed over.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism presents Abraham as the model of the obedience of faith (CCC 144-146), and the Abraham chapters, read whole, carry the Catholic account of justification: utterly free at its beginning (nothing Abraham did earned the call or the reckoning), and truly alive in its course (his faith obeyed, was tested, grew, and worked). Paul and James read the same Abraham, and tonight the group watches them agree.

What You Need to Know

Paul calls his star witness. If justification is by faith apart from works of law (3:28), the obvious objection is Abraham: the father of the covenant, the man of the great deeds. "If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God" (4:2). Then the exhibit: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (4:3, quoting Gen 15:6). Everything in tonight's session hangs on chronology, so master the timeline: Genesis 12, Abram called at seventy-five, and by faith he obeyed and went (Heb 11:8). Genesis 15, the stars and the reckoning. Genesis 16-17, Ishmael born when Abram is eighty-six; circumcision commanded when he is ninety-nine. Genesis 22, Moriah, decades after the reckoning. Paul's argument in 4:9-12 is pure inductive Bible study: Gen 15 precedes Gen 17, therefore the reckoning preceded circumcision by more than thirteen years, therefore circumcision was "a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (4:11), therefore Abraham fathers all believers, Gentile and Jew alike.

Two more movements. In 4:13-17, the promise runs through faith, not law, "that it may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants" (4:16), grounded in the kind of God Abraham believed: one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (4:17). In 4:18-25, Paul paints the anatomy of that faith: "in hope he believed against hope" (4:18), facing the deadness of his own body and Sarah's womb without weakening, and here is the line to underline twice: "he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God" (4:20). Faith that grows is faith that is alive, and a righteousness that can grow is not a static legal entry. The chapter lands on us: the reckoning "will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (4:24-25).

Tonight also stages the meeting your group has been promised since Session 4: Paul and James at the same table. James asks, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?" and says that in Genesis 22 "the scripture was fulfilled" which says Abraham believed and it was reckoned (Jas 2:21-23). Notice what James did: he took Genesis 15:6, Paul's proof text, and declared it fulfilled years later at Moriah, after Isaac had grown. The two apostles are not contradicting; they are dating (and using "justified" with different accents: Paul for the gracious reckoning, James for faith's demonstrated completion). Paul dates the reckoning to prove works of law did not earn it; James dates its fulfillment to prove the faith that was reckoned was the kind that obeys. One Abraham, one faith, portrayed as tested and matured the whole way through.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Genesis 15:1-6. The night of the stars: "Look toward heaven, and number the stars... So shall your descendants be. And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:5-6). The session's foundation stone and first discovery; keep it back.

Genesis 16:16 and 17:24. The two ages that win Paul's argument: Abram eighty-six at Ishmael's birth (after Gen 15), ninety-nine at circumcision. The group does this arithmetic themselves in the second discovery; do not do it for them.

Genesis 22 with James 2:21-23. Moriah, where James says Genesis 15:6 was fulfilled. Reserved for the steelman press; guard it.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. CLEMENT OF ROME

The first-century Roman church read Abraham exactly as tonight's session does. St. Clement holds up "Abraham, who was called 'the friend,'" as one "found faithful in that he rendered obedience unto the words of God," who "through obedience went forth from his land" (1 Clement 10). And when Clement asks why Abraham was blessed, he answers with both hands: was it not because he wrought righteousness and truth through faith? (1 Clement 31). Obedience, righteousness, faith, in one breath, about one man, from the church Paul addressed: an exceptionally early Roman witness to the same union of faith and obedience.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

St. Irenaeus teaches in substance, in *Against Heresies*, that Abraham was the Word's follower before the Word was made flesh: his faith was not a private opinion about God but a setting out after God, leaving land and kin at a command, which is why all who follow Christ in faith are Abraham's true children. For St. Irenaeus the continuity runs one direction: it is not that Christians resemble Abraham, but that Abraham, believing the God who raises the dead (4:17), was already walking toward Christ.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

St. Thérèse of Lisieux teaches, in substance, that nothing so honors God as bold confidence in him (her emphasis, not a ranking of virtues): the soul that expects everything from God, like a child from its father, receives everything, while the soul that calculates its own merits receives what merits can buy. Her little way, drawn from her *Story of a Soul* and reported sayings, is (in this study's application) Romans 4:20-21 turned into a spirituality: no distrust, full conviction that God can do what he promised, and glory given to God precisely by daring to expect much from him. Abraham hoping against hope is the first walker on the little way.

Catechism Connection

CCC 144-146. The obedience-of-faith definition from Session 1 now gets its face: CCC 145 points to Hebrews' eulogy, "By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called," and CCC 146 names him the model who "fulfills the

definition of faith" and quotes tonight's key verse, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." The study's title thread and its central character officially meet.

CCC 2572. On Moriah as the final purification of Abraham's faith: his faith "does not weaken," for he considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead (quoting Heb 11:19). The Catechism reads Genesis 22 as the final purification of Abraham's faith, consonant with James's completion language (Jas 2:22).

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Title thread, major deposit. Abraham is the obedience of faith walking. Do not announce the inclusion; simply use the phrase once, naturally, and move on. It resolves in Session 15.

Boasting thread. 4:2 picks up 3:27 (boasting excluded). Next surfacing: the grafted branches warned against boasting, 11:18-20, Session 11.

Resurrection faith. 4:17 (God who gives life to the dead) and 4:24-25 hand the baton to chapters 5-6: our justification is tied to his rising. Sessions 6-7 run with it.

Sealed guess: three weeks out. Tonight's session is the strongest single input most guesses will need to be measured against. Say nothing; it opens in Session 8, and Take-Home 7 will carry the reminder to bring sealed sheets.

Session Goals

1. The group can retell Abraham's timeline (Gen 12, 15, 16-17, 22) from memory and locate the reckoning within it.
2. The group discovers Genesis 15:6 and computes the circumcision gap themselves from Genesis 16:16 and 17:24.
3. The group can explain how Paul and James use the same Abraham without contradiction, and why "faith was completed by works" (Jas 2:22) is good Pauline theology.
4. The group can say what 4:20 ("he grew strong in his faith") implies about the nature of justifying righteousness.

Timed Plan (75-90 minutes)

- Opening prayer and Win questions: 12 min
- Build questions 1-2 with the Genesis 15 discovery: 22 min
- Build question 3 with the timeline discovery (Gen 16-17 arithmetic): 18 min
- Build question 4 and the steelman chain with the James discovery: 23 min
- Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer: 15 min

If time runs short, pre-chosen cuts: drop the Dig Deeper box, and compress Build question 4 (4:13-17) into a one-sentence bridge you supply. Never cut the timeline arithmetic or the James discovery; they are the session.

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Opening Prayer

Father of Abraham and our Father, you call, and faith is the going; you promise, and faith is the trusting; you test, and faith is the holding on. Give us tonight the faith you reckon as righteousness: the kind that believes you against the evidence and obeys you past the comfortable point. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

1. Who is the most trusting person you know? What has their trust cost them, and what has it built?
2. Have you ever had to act on a promise long before you could see any evidence it would be kept? What was that like?

Build

Read Romans 4:1-8 aloud.

1. Why does Paul reach for Abraham, of all people, right after 3:28? What would it prove if even Abraham was not justified by works?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Abraham is the strongest possible test case: father of the covenant, the man of legendary deeds, the one figure a Jewish objector would play as a trump card. "If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God" (4:2). If the argument holds for Abraham, it holds for everyone; if it fails for Abraham, it fails, period. Paul is not dodging the hard case; he is leading with it.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul's whole case rests on one Old Testament sentence: 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' (4:3). Find the original scene. It happens at night, outdoors, and it involves counting something." Hint if needed: Genesis, before Isaac is even conceived.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Genesis 15:1-6. God brings the childless old man outside: "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them... So shall your descendants be. And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:5-6). Have the group notice what Abraham is doing in the scene: nothing. No rite yet, no law (Sinai is four centuries away); and nothing done had earned this: even his obedient setting-out in Genesis 12 was already grace-led faith, not a wage. A man stands under a night sky and takes God at his word about an impossible future, and God counts that trust as righteousness. Whatever else justification involves, its foundation is laid here, and it is laid on grace.

Read Romans 4:9-12 aloud.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul now argues from chronology: was Abraham reckoned righteous before or after his circumcision? Prove it from Genesis yourselves. Two verses give you ages: find how old Abram was when Ishmael was born, which happens after the night of the stars (end of Genesis 16), and how old Abraham was when he was circumcised (end of Genesis 17). Do the math."

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Genesis 16:16: Abram was eighty-six when Hagar bore Ishmael. Genesis 17:24: Abraham was ninety-nine when he was circumcised. The reckoning of Genesis 15 precedes the circumcision of Genesis 17 by more than thirteen years. Paul's conclusion (4:11): circumcision was "a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." Here the seal certified something already true of Abraham; Paul's point concerns this case, not a rule for every sacred sign. And the payoff (4:11-12): Abraham is father of all who believe, uncircumcised Gentiles included, and of the circumcised who also walk in his footsteps of faith. Your group just reproduced, with open Bibles and subtraction, the argument that opened the covenant to the nations.

2. Read 4:13-17. What does the promise "rest on" and why (4:16)? And what two things does 4:17 say about the God Abraham believed, and why do both matter to a man in his situation?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It rests on grace, "in order that the promise may be guaranteed to all his descendants" (4:16): base the promise on law-keeping and it becomes as fragile as we are; base it on grace and it is as reliable as God. And Abraham's God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (4:17): resurrection and creation from nothing. A man with a dead womb in the family tent needs precisely that God, and no lesser one. Flag quietly for the group: keep 4:17 in your pocket; the letter is about to connect our justification to a specific act of giving life to the dead (4:24-25).

3. Read 4:18-22 slowly. What did Abraham's faith have to stare down, and what happened to the faith itself across those years (4:20)? What does that tell us about the righteousness God reckons?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He stared down the facts: "his own body, which was as good as dead... or... the barrenness of Sarah's womb" (4:19), and "in hope he believed against hope" (4:18). And across the years the faith itself changed: "he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God" (4:20). Growth is the property of living things. If faith can grow, and righteousness is reckoned to faith, then what God works in the believer is not a static ledger entry but a life, and lives develop, are tested, and can be "completed" (hold that word two minutes). The doctrine of growth in righteousness rests on the Church's teaching (Trent; CCC 2010) with these texts as its scriptural soil, not on this verse alone. This is the seam along which the Catholic understanding of justification runs: free at the root, alive in the branch.

Steelman: Reckoned, Not Earned, and Nothing Else?

Build it at full strength. Say to the group: "The Reformed reading of this chapter deserves its full voice, because this is its favorite chapter. Paul could not be clearer: 'to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness' (4:5). To one who does not work. Wages are earned; righteousness is credited, gratis, to the believing ungodly. And the timeline you just built cuts both

ways: nothing Abraham did, no rite, no law, no work, preceded the reckoning. Justification is God crediting righteousness to faith, full stop. And be precise about what we claim: faith is the instrument, never the ground (the ground is Christ), and obedience follows necessarily as fruit; it just contributes nothing to the crediting. If obedience were any part of the package, Paul chose his words very badly." Let it stand tall. Then press with a discovery.

Discovery moment (inside the steelman). Say: "Another apostle wrote about Abraham's justification, quoted Genesis 15:6, and dated things differently. Find James chapter 2, verses 21 to 23, and read them aloud slowly, noting which event of Abraham's life James attaches to our verse."

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

James asks, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?", says "faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works," and declares that at Moriah "the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'" (Jas 2:21-23). Now assemble what the whole group has seen tonight. Paul dates the reckoning to Genesis 15 to prove no work earned it: true, and Catholics confess it without reserve; nothing before justification merits it. James dates the fulfillment of the same verse to Genesis 22, decades later, to prove the faith God reckoned was the obeying, working kind: also true, and Genesis itself agrees, since the faith of chapter 15 had already set out from Haran in chapter 12 (Heb 11:8: "By faith Abraham obeyed"). The two apostles are dating one living faith at two points on its arc. The Reformation reading is right about the free beginning and must strain against James on the living rest; the Catholic reading needs both apostles at full strength and no strain. And notice: your sealed guesses asked what a person must do to be saved. Say nothing yet; three weeks.

DIG DEEPER

"It will be reckoned to us" (4:24). The chapter ends by handing Abraham's night sky to your group: the words were written "for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (4:24-25). Abraham believed the God who gives life to the dead as a promise about the future; we believe him as a report about the past and a person in the present. Same faith, same God, one empty tomb between us. Verse 25 is worth memorizing beyond tonight's verse: the Resurrection is not an epilogue to our justification but its engine.

Send

1. Where is God asking you to believe against hope right now: to trust a promise while the visible evidence says otherwise?
2. Abraham's faith grew strong over decades of walking. What is one practice you could commit to that would let yours grow rather than idle?

Live It This Week

- One clear night this week, go outside, look up, and pray Genesis 15 from the inside: thank God, by name, for a promise of his given in Scripture that you are still waiting to see fulfilled.

- Do one prudent act of obedience this week that leans on God's promises being true, and note what it does to your faith.
- Pray daily: Lord, I believe you are able to do what you have promised (4:21); help my unbelief.

Memory Verse

"No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."

Romans 4:20-21 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

God of Abraham, you justify the ungodly, and so you can justify us. Reckon to us the faith we place in your Son, put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Make our faith like our father's: quick to set out, stubborn in hope, growing strong, giving you glory. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Leader Reference Card · Every Passage, In Order

- Romans 4:1-8 (read aloud: Abraham's case opened; Gen 15:6 quoted; David's blessedness)
- Genesis 15:1-6 (discovery passage: the stars and the reckoning; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 4:9-12 (read aloud: the chronology argument; sign and seal)
- Genesis 16:16 and 17:24 (discovery passages: the two ages for the timeline arithmetic; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 4:13-17 (promise resting on grace; the God who gives life to the dead)
- Romans 4:18-25 (read slowly: hope against hope; faith grew strong; raised for our justification)
- James 2:21-23 (steelman discovery: Gen 15:6 fulfilled at Moriah; do not reveal in advance; cf. Gen 22, Heb 11:8)
- CCC 144-146, 2572 (Catechism Connection)
- Memory verse: Romans 4:20-21