



# Our Hope Has a History

Three Foundations of  
Grace Through Faith

Romans 4:13-25

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# Introduction

What good is the Old Testament? Doesn't that just pertain to the Jewish people? Can't I just read the New Testament, know Jesus, and be saved? Is it a waste of time to read and study the whole Bible? With Christmas around the corner, can't we just start in the New Testament?

The Wall Street Journal recently reported that the sales of Bibles are booming. One of the reasons why is because people are searching for hope. And I think this is good – but isn't our hope in Jesus? With all those rules and regulations, what good is the Old Testament?

## Big Idea

I do think the Old Testament is important, and the big idea in our sermon will help prove our reason why: **Just as Abraham was justified by grace through faith in God's promise, so are Christians counted as righteous by grace through faith in Jesus.** In other words, Just as Abraham was declared right with God by trusting in God's promises, so are Christians credited to be right with God by trusting in Jesus. Salvation is not earned; it's all a gift from God.

It is a common misconception to think that people in the Old Testament were saved from their sin by keeping the Law – obeying the Ten Commandments, sacrificing animals, going to the temple. But that is not true. People in the Old Testament were saved in the same way that we here in the New Testament era are saved – by grace through faith. Justification has always been by faith alone. God does not change.

## Context

Our text today is an illustration. Paul uses Abraham to show that people in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament are saved not by works, but by faith. While we trust God's promises and look back at a Savior, they trusted God's promises and looked forward to a Savior<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In a previous sermon, I mentioned that even though both Jews and Gentiles can be children of God – there are certain advantages to being a Jew. One of them is that they have the oracles of God, or broadly speaking – the Old Testament, as their history. We're going to look at Abraham as our own. <https://www.diveindigdeep.com/blog/messages/he-is-faithful-and-righteous>

# Sermon Preview

We're going to see three foundations of grace through faith. I say that these are foundations because Abraham is foundational to the Old Testament. He would be considered the founding father of the Jews. He is the patriarch of God's people. When people refer to God, they refer to him as the God of Abraham. It's important for us to know his story. Here is our outline:

1. God's Promise – Heir of the World (Romans 4:13-15)
  - Flashback to God's Call (Genesis 12:1-3)
2. God's Purpose – Grace Through Faith (Romans 4:16-22)
  - Flashback to God's Covenant Part B (Genesis 17:1-8)
3. God's People – Counted to Us (Romans 4:23-25)
  - Flashback to God's Covenant Part A (Genesis 15:1-6)

I want us to follow the flow of Paul as much as possible, and Paul jumps around in Abraham's story. It might help to pretend we're watching a movie of Paul writing his letter, and as he goes through his points we see flashbacks to Abraham's life. Let's get started.



# 1. God's Promise – Heir of the World

The first foundation is God's Promise – God made a promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world.

*13 For **the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world** did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. (Romans 4:13-15)*

Flashback to Genesis 12:1-3. This story is famous because it is God's original promise to Abraham. God calls Abram and gives him a promise:

*12 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And **I will make of you a great nation**, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)*

Abraham's name was originally Abram. Abram means “high father” – but Abram had no children. He was 75 years old when God called him to move. God makes Abram a promise – that his descendants will be a great nation and bless all the families of the earth. Paul is making a summary statement with this verse and in verses we'll see later, promising that Abraham and his offspring would inherit the world.

Going back to Romans, Paul says the promise did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. The law is a big concept in the Old Testament<sup>2</sup>. Here, the law is specifically the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai. In the history of Israel, in the biblical timeline, Moses came after Abraham. Paul argues that the Ten Commandments weren't in place – they weren't even a thing when Abraham was alive. The promise that

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<sup>2</sup> The law can be seen as the entire Old Testament. It can even be understood as the first five books of the Bible – also known as the Pentateuch. Here, the law is specifically the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai. We know this because in Galatians, Paul says specifically that the law came 430 years after Abram. In the history of Israel, in the biblical timeline, Abraham came before Moses. If you think about it in terms of the Bible, Abraham is in the book of Genesis and Moses is in the book of Exodus.

God gave Abram was not conditioned on following rules or regulations – but on faith, trusting that God would do what he says. Paul goes on to say that the inheritance does not come from obeying the law. Another way to say this is that if you replace faith with works, you lose the inheritance. It is impossible to follow the rules and regulations perfectly, it is impossible to earn God’s favor in this way. You can’t work your way towards the inheritance, it would just earn you God’s wrath. The law does not make us sinners. The law shows us that we are sinful. Sin does exist apart from the law – Adam and Eve came before Abraham and their sin got us here in the first place – so Paul uses the word transgression to show that we cross the line of the law, we’re out of bounds, we’re in the wrong. If you think that you’re a good person, look at yourself in light of the law, and you’ll see that we always lose. You must trust God’s promises over your performance.

## Application

So, will you trust God’s promises over your performance? This applies most importantly to your salvation – you cannot earn your way to Heaven – but it also has implications for how we live as Christians. For instance, will you trust that God loves you no matter your grades, what college you get into, or what career you have? Will you trust that God knows what’s best even when life doesn’t work out the way you want? Will you trust that God is with you even if you get into an accident? Will you trust that God sees you even when others do not? Will you trust that God cares for you even if your relationship with your parents could be better?<sup>3</sup>

Let me give you a real example from my life. Two academic events have sort of defined my education. The first was that I repeated the first grade. Jeremiah 29:11 got me through it. The last was that I dropped out of grad school. Romans 8:28 got me through it. I’m here to tell you that you can trust God’s promises.

I’m not saying that we shouldn’t try our best in our relationships, or in our education, or just in life as a human being – but I think even with how hard we try, we’ll be met with disappointments. We can be responsible, we can

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<sup>3</sup> There’s a storyline from Captain America that really helps as an illustration. Steve Rogers has a best friend, Bucky Barnes. Steve promises Bucky that he’s with him “until the end of the line.” Throughout the films, Bucky becomes brainwashed and does some terrible things. He basically becomes a bad guy and beats up Captain America. He even causes a Civil War between Captain America and Iron Man. And Steve stays faithful to Bucky. He keeps his promise, and Bucky needs to learn to trust that Steve will always have his back.



be good stewards, but God is still sovereign. And instead of blaming and punishing ourselves – God offers us an alternative. To rest in God’s promises, and to place our hope in him. The Bible is filled with God’s promises to his people. Trust God’s promises over your performance. And when it comes to our salvation, know that “the law could never save us. Our lawlessness had won. Until the pure and spotless Lamb had finally come.”

## 2. God’s Purpose – Grace Through Faith

The second foundation is God’s Purpose – God purposed that the inheritance would come by grace through faith. Look at how many times the word faith and belief appear, linking it to grace:

*16 That is why **it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace** and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 as it is written, “**I have made you the father of many nations**”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” (Romans 4:16-22) [emphasis added]*

Flashback to Genesis 17:1-8. This story is famous because it comes when God establishes circumcision, but it is also when God gives Abram the new name of Abraham:

*1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him... 4 “**Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, 2 but your name shall be Abraham, 3 for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you... for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.**” (Genesis 17:1-8)*

Paul fast forwards in Abram’s story, and at 99 years old God says not only will he make Abram a singular great nation, but he will make Abram the father of many nations, a multitude of nations. God now gives Abram the new name of Abraham, which means father of a multitude. But God doesn’t

stop there. God continues to say that kings shall come from him and receive an everlasting possession. This is another reason why Paul can say that God promised Abraham to be an heir of the world.

Going back to Romans, Paul says that Abraham believed in God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. This is a callback to Genesis where God creates out of nothing. And then Paul says, basically, that Abraham is old and he knows it – there’s no way he’s going to have children at 100 years old. But he believed that God would keep his promise and provide. And his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” Paul is connecting faith with grace. Just as faith trusts in God’s promise, so does grace trust in God’s favor. Just as faith says you can’t get to God on your own effort, grace says you can’t earn God’s love. Abraham actually grew strong in his faith – his faith increased as he was waiting. He gave glory, honor, and worship to God as he relied and rested in him.

Before we move on, we need to address a potential problem:

*19 He did not weaken in **faith** when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his **faith** as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his **faith** was “counted to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:16-22) [emphasis added]*

Paul said that Abraham did not weaken or waver in faith. But there’s more to Abraham’s story that Paul kind of skipped over. Abraham had a wife named Sarai. At 75 years old, she suggested that Abraham should have a child with her servant, Hagar. So Abraham did, and Hagar bore a son—Ishmael. But God said that this was not his plan. No, God would give Sarai a son. And just like God gave Abram the new name of Abraham, God gave Sarai which means “my princess,” the new name of Sarah, which means “mother of nations.” You might object by saying that Abraham was weak and wavered in faith because of this instance, and many other instances in his life. Yet Paul still sees Abraham, overall, as strong in faith. Notice again how many times **faith** appears. In the end, Abraham believed, had hope, and was fully convinced. And I think this is to point us to the object of Abraham’s faith. He believed **God**. He had hope in God. He was fully convinced by God. Abraham did not just muster up faith by himself, but his faith was made strong, reinvigorated, and was grown by **God**. Even having faith itself cannot be considered a work, you cannot take credit for it – faith is a gift given by God. So there is no

boasting in ourselves, but God is worshiped and gets the glory. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints means that God will preserve his people. And it's all by grace.

## Application

So, will you remember God's grace? Maybe you might have had a setback in your faith like Abraham. Paul says that Abraham's sin did not define his faith. Remember God's grace to you.<sup>4</sup>

Let me give you some practical tips from my own life to help you actively remember God's grace. Because in times when you have sinned, you might be tempted to shrink away from God. I encourage you to do the opposite. Start by coming to God. Church, small groups, quiet times. Next, confess to God and to others. Finally, cling to God. Cling to him by singing. Cling to him by memorizing Scripture. Psalm 51:17 — a broken and contrite heart God will not despise. Romans 8:1 — no condemnation. Cling to him by cutting out whatever it was that was causing you to sin.

For the Christian, God's grace is there. It's not wrong to consider yourself a sinner. But what matters most, and what defines you, is that you are a sinner saved by grace and now a child of God. God does not expect perfect people. But he does want you to persevere — and he will help. Continue to trust him. And when it comes to our salvation, know that it is “a fortune I inherit by no work I have done.” Remember God's grace.

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<sup>4</sup> In the Lion King, Simba makes a mistake. He disobeys his dad. He goes into the elephant graveyard and he gets his father killed by his uncle Scar. Simba lets this define him. He runs away. Eventually, he confronts his past, he accepts responsibility, and he moves forward. He finds redemption and forgiveness — from himself and others.



### 3. God's People – Counted to Us

The third foundation is God's People – it would be counted to us who believe.

*23 But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. **It will be counted to us who believe in him...** (Romans 4:23-24)*

Flashback to Genesis 15:1-6. We're going back again in Abraham's story. So here, he's not yet Abraham, but he's still Abram. This story is famous because God tells Abraham that his offspring shall be as innumerable as the stars in the sky – a special phrase that gets repeated in both the Old and New Testaments to remind us about God's promise:

*15 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2 But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” 4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” 5 And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” 6 **And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.** (Genesis 15:1-6)*

Paul takes us back towards the beginning of Abram's story again. And now we get to hear what Abram says to God – he questions God. He mentions Eliezer of Damascus – he is Abram's servant. I see some irony here because Elizer's name means “God is help.” Abram says **God you gave me a promise, but how is this possible because I'm still childless. I have a servant, Eliezer of Damascus, and because I have no children he's the only heir I have – he's the one that will get the inheritance.** And God says **no, that's not going to happen, you will have your very own son to receive your inheritance.** God tells him **look at the stars, there's so many, uncountable, and so shall your offspring be.** This is the final reason why Paul can say that God promised Abraham to be an heir of the world.

Going back to Romans, Paul points out that Abram believes the Lord, and this is the key phrase – God counted it to him as righteousness. Notice that God doesn't flat out say “I count it to you as righteous.” Paul says that the

author wrote these words down for his readers and for all believers today. It was meant for us to understand how we become God's people: It will be counted to us gentiles, non Jews who don't come from Abraham's biological family, who don't come from his blood, but we, too, believe the Lord. We are united together as God's family.

## Application

So, will you find unity in God's family? While our text specifically applies to the unity between Jews and Gentiles, we can make the broader application of unity between all believers.

Let me give you an example from my own life. When I was younger, I had a temptation to compete and compare with other Christians. Social media makes it even more difficult now ! I find that it's far better not to compete – but to collaborate, cooperate, and encourage.<sup>5</sup>

With unity comes humility, forgiveness, and peace amongst each other. God's people includes anyone who believes – and we are united together in Christ. You are not alone. Find unity in God's family. One day in Heaven, surrounded by the saints, and “When I stand accepted before the throne of God, I'll gaze upon my Jesus and thank Him for the cross.”

## The Gospel

As we reach the end of the passage, Paul writes exactly what we are to believe to be saved, exactly what we believe to receive the inheritance – we believe the Gospel:

*24 ...It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead **Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.** (Romans 4:24-25)*

We believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and that he resurrected. The theological phrase is Jesus' substitutionary atonement. Our sins have been put on him and we are crucified and raised together with him. We are forgiven, justified, and declared righteous in Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> In High School Musical, the students of East High found unity between each other as a family. Whether athletes or scholars, they learned to come together united under the common bond of high school and with the goal of putting on a show. They learn to celebrate their differences. They learn to support each other. They become friends and family.



And let me tell you about our inheritance! We inherit the world by grace through faith in Jesus. Christ and everything we have in him is the complete fulfillment and realization of the promise.

## Conclusion

Let's go back to the beginning again for our conclusion. I asked you: What good is the Old Testament? Awe have seen, it's foundational to our faith — especially to our understanding of grace through faith. One of the reasons why Bible sales are booming is because people are searching for hope — and our hope has a history. It is not abstract — it is anchored all the way to Abraham. Just as Abraham was justified by grace through faith in God's promise, so are Christians counted as righteous by grace through faith in Jesus. Let's trust what God says. The more I think about it, the Old Testament is not just the history of the Jewish people — but it's my history, too. I've been adopted into the family of God.

This Christmas, know that the Messiah did not just begin in the manger. The story of our Savior did not start in Bethlehem. It goes back all the way to the book of Genesis. In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the earth. God used those stars he created as a sign to Abraham. And when David writes in a psalm that the heavens declare the glory of God, and that the sky above proclaims his handiwork — I can take some artistic license to say that we shine like the stars when we have faith in our Heavenly Father. And when the Magi saw the star in the sky that pointed them to the newborn King, it glowed brightly as a brother amongst the other stars that symbolized Abraham's offspring. May you receive the gift of faith this Christmas in the Word of God made flesh. And let's look towards the future together — when Christ will come again.



# Our Hope Has a History

Our hope, it has a history—

From Abraham to Christ.

The promises of God prove true

For everlasting life.

An inheritance of nations!

We're children of the King!

For Jesus, crucified and raised

Has set his people free.

Free from sin and satan!

Deliverance from death!

Belief and trust were always what

Was counted righteousness.

Our works could never save us!

Our clothing stained and torn!

Whatever gain I count as loss

For knowing Jesus more.

Hope on Christmas morning.

Mercy every dawn.

By grace we have been saved through faith—

It is the gift of God.

## References

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# Reflection Questions

1. How has this sermon changed the way you think or feel about the Old Testament?
2. What areas in your life do you struggle to trust God's promises, perhaps because you feel like you need to "earn" something (like acceptance, success, or love)?
3. Do you ever rely on your performance to feel secure in your relationship with God? How can you shift your focus from performance to trusting God's promises instead?
4. Paul says that Abraham's faith was "counted to him as righteousness" and that this applies to us as well. How does this truth impact your understanding of your relationship with God?
5. In what ways can we find unity with other believers, even when we come from different backgrounds, cultures, or life experiences? How does the truth of our shared faith in Jesus help to bridge these gaps?
6. How do you typically respond when you mess up or sin? How can you remind yourself of God's grace and return to Him with faith instead of guilt or shame?
7. In what areas do you find yourself comparing or competing with others? What can you do to come alongside and cooperate, collaborate, and encourage instead?
8. Romans tells us that Jesus' death and resurrection were for our justification. How does this truth shape the way you think about salvation and your personal faith in Christ?
9. How does knowing that you inherit the world through faith in Jesus change the way you live day-to-day?
10. Christmas is a time when we celebrate Jesus' birth. How can remembering the Gospel—Jesus' death and resurrection for us—deepen your celebration of Christmas this year?