

A STUDY IN GALATIANS

Part 15 – “Born Free”

Galatians 4:21-31

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Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:21-31 ESV).

As the Apostle Paul comes to the conclusion of his doctrinal discussion of justification by faith, he caps his presentation with an allegorical illustration. He presents the danger of attempting salvation by the works of the law one more time. At the same time he points to the privileges involved in salvation by grace through faith alone. The vehicle for his presentation is called an allegory in our text. What the Apostle does is use a well-known historical incident to illustrate the spiritual truths he is setting forth.

The historical incident comes from the life of Abraham. You may recall Abraham was the father of two sons. The status of these two sons in the family in Abraham’s family illustrates the difference between a person working for salvation and one who is trusting God for salvation. **The difference began with the difference in their mothers.**

- Ishmael, the first of the sons, had Hagar as his mother. He was born when Abraham’s faith faltered and, at the insistence of Sarah, took her slave attendant Hagar to mother a child. The birth of this child could be completely explained in natural terms. There was nothing supernatural about Ishmael’s birth. Hagar was a slave.
- Isaac, the second son, had Sarah as his mother. He was born after God had given a promise to Abraham and Sarah for a son to be born to them when it was physically impossible. That which God had promised, he enabled to be. Isaac was born free because his mother was the free wife of Abraham.

These two mothers and their sons illustrate what happens to men. Those who seek salvation through the law are born slaves like Ishmael. They have the wrong mother. Those who trust in the promise of God are born free like Isaac. They have the right mother.

THERE ARE THREE KEY CONCEPTS THAT HELP US TO DETERMINE WHO OUR MOTHER IS...

FIRST, EXAMINE YOUR BIRTH (vv. 21-23).

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. (vv. 21-23).

The birth makes the difference between freedom and slavery spiritually. The difference between these two boys illustrates the basic truth the Apostle Paul wants us to see.

1. *First, the birth of Ishmael was a very human affair.* In their unbelief Abraham and Sarah came up with a plan to help God out. Since God wanted Abraham to have an heir, and it was obviously impossible for Sarah to have a child, they had to have a substitute plan. The child born out of this ill-conceived union was marked by the status of his mother. She was a “salver woman.” Therefore, the child would be the “son of a slave” and a slave himself.
2. *Second, the birth of Isaac was a very spiritual affair.* It was typical of the spiritual birth. It was humanly impossible. Sarah’s capacity to bear a child was physically past. Yet, God, who had promised Abraham a son, provided that son through the womb of Sarah miraculously. When Isaac was born it could only be explained in terms of the work of God. He was a “son of the free woman born through promise.”

They represent two types of religious experiences. Ishmael represents those seeking salvation by their good works. While the Apostle Paul is referencing the Judaizers, it should not be lost on us that the descendants of Ishmael are the people of Islam. Both groups explain their religious status in terms of human achievement. It is the work of man. All this kind of religious experience can produce is bondage. It is born in slavery and produces slavery. If you are trusting in any form of obedience to any law or religious efforts, you will never be anything more than a spiritual slave.

WE MUST BE HONEST AND ASK WHETHER OUR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE CAN BE EXPLAINED IN ANY TERMS EXCEPT THE MIRACULOUS WORK OF GOD. If the answer is in any way yes, we are slaves!

SECOND, EXAMINE THE BASIS OF YOUR SALVATION (vv. 24-28).

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. (vv. 24-28).

What is the basis of your spiritual life? Is it based on faith or works? Is it based on what God has done, or what you must do? How you answer that question determines whether you are bound or free. Abraham is the example Paul uses. He is known as a great man of faith, however, it was not always so. Ishmael is forever a reminder of his unbelief.

When Ishmael was conceived, Abraham was basing his life on a life built on works. He was attempting to do the work of God for him instead of resting in the promise of God. God has promised him a son, so he would just produce his own son. At the time it sounded so logical and right in light of the culture in which he lived. **AND, OF COURSE WE SEE THE FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES OF THAT DECISION IN THE MILLENIA OF WAR AND SUFFERING THAT HAS ENSUED IN THE MIDDLE EAST!**

THIRD, EXAMINE THE BLESSING OF REDEMPTION BY GRACE (vv. 29-31).

For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband." Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (vv. 29-31).

There is such a contrast between the life of Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael's life was tragic. His life was made miserable because his mother was a slave in the family. Sarah had such resentment toward Ishmael that finally he was completely excluded and cast out to die in the wilderness. Isaac was just the opposite. His life was privileged. He was the heir of Abraham, fully accepted from the beginning. He was the object of the unhindered devotion and love of his father daily. He enjoyed the favor of his father day after day. So, Paul says that is our blessing as believers and heirs with Christ. **He mentions two specific blessings:**

1. **First, we are given freedom.** When the son of the promise was born into the family, he was free from the first day. He didn't need to do anything to possess this freedom. He did not need to do anything to become the son of Abraham. He was his son by birth! He was born free! And, he would remain free by the same grace he was birthed within.
2. **Second, we are given an inheritance.** Isaac did not earn the right to receive the inheritance, he was born to it. No amount of effort can ever earn the right to the inheritance in the family of God. It comes to those who have placed their faith in the promise of God to redeem us through the work of Jesus Christ.

THE WHOLE ISSUE IS: WILL YOU CHOOSE THE WAY OF THE LAW OR THE WAY OF GRACE?

D. L. Lowry, a long time friend and mentor helped me to see this so clearly with the following outline:

- The law prohibits... grace invites and gives.
- The law condemns the sinner... grace redeems the sinner.
- The law says DO... grace says DONE.
- The law says "continue to be holy"... grace says "it is finished."
- The law curses... grace blesses.
- The law slays the sinner... grace makes the sinner alive.
- The law shuts every mouth before God... grace opens the mouth in praise to God.

- The law condemns the best man... grace saves the worst man.
- The law says “pay what you owe”... grace says “I freely forgive all.”
- The law says “the wages of sin are death”... grace says “the gift of God is eternal life.”
- The law says “the soul that sins it shall die”... grace says “believe and live.”
- The law reveals sin... grace atones for sin.
- By law is the knowledge of sin... by grace is the redemption from sin.
- The law was given by Moses... grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.
- The law demands obedience... grace bestows and gives power to obey.
- The law was written on tablets of stone... grace is written on the tablets of the heart.
- The law was done away with in Christ... grace abides forever.
- The law puts us in bondage... grace sets us free in the liberty of the sons of God.

WHICH WILL IT BE FOR YOU? LAW OR GRACE? O GOD, GIVE ME GRACE! GIVE ME GRACE!