XII. Two Mothers, Two Sons, Two Covenants

April 4/5, 2012 Galatians 4:21-31

Aim: To understand the biblical truth that human effort in justification leads to bondage, while faith in the promises of God leads to freedom through Jesus Christ.

In this section, the Apostle is concluding the series of arguments to deter the Galatians from running headlong back into Judaism. He has worked out carefully the doctrine of justification received by faith alone based solely on the work of Christ. He has gone on to describe the relationship of law as covenant to the new covenant in Christ. He has established that our adoption and justification are by free grace and not according to works. He has written of the liberty that is ours in Christ; a liberty that surpasses both the bondage of the minority of Israel and the bondage of paganism. He establishes that if a Gentile Christian turns to the ceremonies of Judaism, he is placing himself under bondage as terrible as that slavery in which he had existed in his paganism. Then Paul opens his heart to them, by affectionately appealing to them that they heed his teaching and walk with him. Now he concludes the argument with a historical sketch and its spiritual lessons.

It is sometimes said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those that divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don’t! Apparently, the apostle Paul was in the former category, for he divided the whole world into two groups: the slaves and the free. The slaves are under the law and outside of Christ, while the free are in Christ and no longer under the law because they live by faith.

Using Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, to illustrate his argument, the apostle drives home the lesson that there are two distinct covenants (of works and of promise), operating by two different principles (the flesh and the Spirit) and leading to two distinct results (bondage and liberty). As Paul develops the analogy, he first gives its historical background, then its divine interpretation, and finally its personal application.

A. The Historical Situation (Gal. 4:21-23)

1. The Challenge (4:21)

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?

Paul now returns to his theological and scriptural argument, one that picks up the theme of ‘slavery vs. freedom’ which had been introduced in this chapter’s opening verse. Paul begins this section with a challenge. He challenges them to think about what they were saying and doing. The Galatians were desiring ‘to be under the law.’ His meaning could be paraphrased like this: ‘So you want to be under the law, do you? Well, do you have any idea what the law really says? Because if you did, you would realize that the law itself tells you not to be under the law!’ Evidently, since they were only desiring this, they had not yet completely apostatized from the faith.

Paul teaches us that all Scripture must be interpreted Christologically, that is, in relation to Christ. Are Sarah and Hagar just Old Testament characters? No, declares the apostle, they are also living parables, demonstrating the futility of works and the efficacy of grace. The New
Testament writers, together with Jesus Himself, *always* see the Old Testament as testifying to Christ (Luke 24:27; John 5:39; Heb. 1:5-14; etc.).

2. The Story (4:22-23)

*For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise...*

   a) The Account

To argue with the legalists on their own terms, Paul took an example from the book of Genesis. His example was Abraham, who is mentioned eight times in this epistle. From this we may infer that the Judaizers claimed the father of the Jews as their hero. Before Paul could help the Galatians understand the gospel of free grace, he had to correct their interpretation of Abraham. He used a Jewish argument to convince the Galatians not to become more Jewish!

This is the eighth time Paul has mentioned Abraham. Since the agitators in Galatia were, on one level at least, proclaiming their Jewishness and insisting on obedience to Jewish ceremonial laws as something necessary for justification, for Paul to appeal to the father-figure of Judaism, was to take the ground from under them. By arguing from Scripture (rather than tradition), Paul is teaching them a fundamental lesson of the Christian life: it is shaped by what the Bible teaches not by the proclivities of cultic movements or leaders.

In verses 22 and 23 Paul refers to Genesis 16:22. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. In Genesis 16, impatient Abraham takes matters into his own hands and seeks the promised seed through Hagar, Sarah’s handmaid. Hagar bears a son to Abraham, Ishmael. God, however, declares to Abraham that Ishmael is not the son of promise. Instead God would miraculously provide the son of promise. Thus in Genesis 17:18-19, when Abraham pleads with God to accept Ishmael as the seed, God says, ‘No, the seed is going to be the one provided according to the promise.

The other part of the story that Paul alludes to (in 4:29-30) is recorded in Genesis 21, which tells of the occasion when Ishmael mocked Isaac, perhaps disdain ing him as the covenant bearer. In response God commands Abraham to excommunicate Ishmael from the visible covenant community and to send him away. In answering Abraham’s doubts, God tells him that the promise is going to be accomplished in Isaac. He is the son of promise.

   b) The Application

Throughout the analogy, all distinctions between the two sons are based on the fact that they had two different mothers, not on the fact that they had a common father, Abraham. The heritage of the line through one mother is lostness and bondage, and the heritage of the line through the other mother is salvation and freedom.

There were many similarities between Ishmael and Isaac. They were both sons of Abraham, and thus they had the same biological father. They were both circumcised. They both grew up in the same home. Yet for all their similarities, there were several critical differences between them. One difference was their status in the eyes of the law. Although the boys had the same paternity, they each had a different maternity. From their respective mothers, they inherited two different legal standings. Ishmael’s mother was a slave, so he was born a slave. Isaac, on the other hand, was born free, the heir of a free woman.
Another crucial difference between the two half-brothers was the manner of their births. Each son was born a different way. Ishmael ‘was born according to the flesh.’ This phrase, which is repeated in verse 29, means that Ishmael was procreated in the ordinary way. However, Isaac was not born ‘according to the flesh.’ His birth itself was ordinary enough, but the circumstances surrounding his conception were extraordinary. He was ‘born through promise’ (v. 23) or ‘according to Spirit’ (v. 29). This is what distinguished Isaac from Ishmael: Isaac’s birth was the result of God’s supernatural intervention.

(1) According to the Flesh
Abraham was justified by faith (Gen. 15:6). But what does Abraham the believer do in Genesis 16? He tries to accomplish God’s purpose by the flesh. Now he is no longer living by faith; rather he is living by the flesh. He is using ungodly means in a vain attempt to accomplish God’s purposes. It was ‘according to the flesh,’ not because it was physical, but because the scheme for Ishmael’s conception, devised by Sarah and carried out by Abraham, was motivated by purely selfish desires and fulfilled by purely human means. When Abraham got Hagar pregnant, he was operating on the principle that ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ He was trying to take the blessing, rather than waiting to receive it. Whereas Isaac was a gift, Ishmael is what Abraham got for trying to do things his way instead of God’s way.

But God does not subscribe to the dictum that the ends justify the means; therefore, the son of that relationship, Ishmael, is called the son of the flesh. By this language Paul does not mean that he was conceived out of lust, but out of an attempt to fulfill God’s purposes by a fleshly endeavor. Since Ishmael was the son of a slave, he was a slave; he was in bondage. Hence those who seek to accomplish God’s purposes according to the flesh will only produce bondage. On the other hand, Isaac, whom God provided supernaturally, was the child of promise. In him God fulfilled His promise. He was the son of Sarah, the freeborn wife. He was the heir, who would enjoy the full liberty of the household.

If the reference to ‘the flesh’ is pejorative, this is not because of any implied immorality (for a slave to bear children for her mistress was not in those days considered illegal – cp. Gen. 30:1-13). It refers rather to the fleshly (natural) wisdom which flew in the face of God’s promise. It made sense to the natural mind to give God a helping hand in providing a posterity for Abraham. The promise was not abandoned in their thinking, just distorted; Hagar’s child would be Abraham’s seed and, legally speaking, Sarah’s also. The flaw in such reasoning, of course, was the belief that their scheme could somehow secure the fulfillment of God’s promise. This was the Judaizers’ error, and the same mistake is made today by those who think that man can contribute to his own salvation, whether by conforming to some law, by good works, by decisions, or by ‘commitment’ to Christ. The lesson is clear: any attempt to replace the pure promise of God (salvation by God’s free grace) by human endeavor or design is doomed to failure. Why? Because ‘Those who are in the flesh cannot please God’ (Rom. 8:8).

(2) Through Promise
By contrast, Isaac was born ‘through promise.’ This does not just mean that God had promised Abraham and Sarah a child of their own. It means also that the child could never have been conceived in a purely natural manner, since Sarah and Abraham were simply too old (cp. Rom. 4:19). Had a natural conception been possible, there would have been no need for faith, and thus no imputed righteousness (Rom. 4:20-22).
The birth of Isaac was supernatural, not in the sense that he was conceived directly by the Holy Spirit, as Jesus was, but that the Holy Spirit miraculously enabled Abraham and Sarah to produce a child after she was far past normal childbearing age and had been barren all her life.

(3) Ishmael vs. Isaac

Hagar was a slave, subject to bondage, while Sarah was a freewoman. So those who are in bondage to the law are the spiritual descendants of the slave-girl, while those who enjoy liberty in Christ are children of the free wife. Hagar and her son possessed nothing of their own and were devoid of all privilege in Abraham’s household, though they dwelt there. Sarah and her son, on the other hand, possessed all things, by virtue of their relationship to Abraham. So those who seek to be justified by the law, though it be God’s law, are mere slaves and cannot inherit God’s blessing. But those who come to God in faith, without the deeds of the law, inherit all things through their relationship to Christ.

The conception of Ishmael represents man’s way, the way of the flesh, whereas that of Isaac represents God’s way, the way of promise. The first is analogous to the way of religious self-effort and works righteousness; the second is analogous to the way of faith and God’s imputed righteousness. The one is the way of legalism, the other the way of grace. Ishmael symbolizes those who have had only natural birth and who trust in their own works. Isaac symbolizes those who also have had spiritual birth because they have trusted in the work of Jesus Christ.

From the very beginning there was a fundamental spiritual difference between the two sons. One son was born by proxy, the other by promise. One came by works; the other by faith. One was a slave; the other was free. Thus Ishmael and Isaac represent two entirely different approaches to religion: law against grace, flesh against Spirit, self-reliance against divine dependence.

Isaac was the result of an act of mercy on God’s part, whereas Ishmael was the result of human contrivance and effort. One was the result of grace; the other was the result of effort. By introducing this story, Paul has managed to bring to the surface the different strategies toward justification operating in Galatia: the way of grace through faith; the way of human effort and contrivance.

B. The Allegorical Interpretation (Gal. 4:24-27)

1. Allegory (4:24a)

...which things are symbolic.

Many translators have chosen simply to transliterate rather than translate the term *allégoreō* (‘allegorically’). This has led to difficulty in handling the passage, because usually an allegory is either a fanciful or fictional story carrying a hidden meaning, or a true story in which the apparent meaning is meaningless. Allegory as such is a tenuous and dangerous means of interpretation. An allegory is a story in which specific people, places, and events stand for deep spiritual truths (e.g., *Pilgrim’s Progress*). Because allegory does not need to be based on fact, it is limited only by an interpreter’s imagination and is easily influenced by his personal predispositions. It frequently leads to biased and often bizarre conclusions. Allegory is a Pandora’s box that ignores the literal, historical meaning of Scripture and opens biblical interpretation to every extreme. Because of man’s finiteness and fallenness, it inevitably leads to arbitrariness, absurdity, and futility.
But obviously the record of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar is both historical and meaningful. It is best to identify this literal, historical account as simply analogous to and illustrative of the spiritual truth that Paul elucidates with it. The dictionary defines analogy as ‘a partial similarity between like features of two things on which a comparison may be made.’ Paul is simply comparing the similarities between the story of Abraham and the spiritual truth he is teaching, and this interpretation is consistent with the meaning of ἀλληγορέω. The Holy Spirit directed Paul to use analogy on this occasion in order to show the Judaizers that God’s plan of redemption has always been by grace.

ἀλληγορέω is a compound of allos (‘other’) and aγορευó (‘to speak in a place of assembly, that is, publicly’), and means literally ‘to speak other than one seems to speak.’ It was used of a story that conveyed meaning other than what was apparent in the literal sense of the words. It has the idea of one thing being represented under the image of another. In this case, the spiritual truth is illustrated by the historical story, and translating it as ‘analogically’ is consistent with the basic meaning of the Greek.

In using terminology ‘symbolic,’ Paul does not mean ‘merely symbolic,’ as if the story of Hagar just happens to illustrate his point. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul is telling us that the Old Testament story is replete with Messianic truth. Paul’s ‘allegorical’ interpretation was based squarely on the facts of the historical situation. He recognized that the history of Abraham’s sons had something significant to say about the way God deals with His people. Isaac and Ishmael stood for something. There is an analogy between what God did for them and what He offers to us. In the eyes of God, everyone is either an Ishmael or an Isaac. Ultimately, their story is about the gospel of God’s free grace.

In the history of interpretation ‘allegory’ described the method of interpretation that sought to avoid the literal meaning of Scripture in order to steer clear of an apparent harshness in the literal reading or to get a more spiritual meaning. Prior to the Reformation of the sixteenth century, it was common to employ the medieval quadriga by which every passage of Scripture was interpreted at four different levels: the literal, the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical (or mystical). The Reformers re-introduced rules of interpretation that focused on the meaning of words according to the rules of grammar and syntax, giving consideration to the period of history when they were written.

Medieval interpreters used the allegorical method predominantly. This definition of allegory is not what Paul means. Rather, he says that there is a clear relationship between an historical event and New Testament spiritual principles. He is drawing an analogy. Note, he does not ignore or explain away the history. Rather, he says the historical incident illustrates and contrasts the consequences of attempting to fulfill God’s purposes by human endeavor or by faith.

The analogy between Abraham’s actions and what the Galatian Christians were tempted to do is clear. Abraham was justified by faith, but sought to accomplish the promise of God in the flesh. His attempt produced bondage and he was left still without an heir. Likewise, the Galatian Christians had received justification by faith. Now, they were considering fulfilling God’s promised salvation by human effort, by the works of the flesh. Paul warns that they are doing exactly what Abraham tried to do. The moment they submit to circumcision, the moment they concur that Jewish ceremonies are necessary for acceptance with God and sanctification, they,
like Abraham, are resorting to the arm of the flesh to accomplish the purposes of God. The end will be bondage.

Some commentators believe that Paul is here responding to the Judaizers ‘in kind.’ His opponents, they suggest, had been the first to introduce this allegory into the argument. According to this idea, the Judaizers accused the Gentile converts of being like Ishmael, excluded from the inheritance, while the Jewish believers were true sons, like Isaac. To share the inheritance, therefore, the Gentiles must become Jews through circumcision and law-keeping. In reply, Paul reverses the allegory, showing that the distinction is not racial, between Jew and Gentile, but spiritual, between those born of the flesh (Ishmael) and those born of the spirit (Isaac). Either way, whether Paul uses the story on his own initiative or by way of response, he uses it with great effect.

2. Twos (4:24b)

*For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—*

The story actually has six sets of twos in it: two women (mothers), two sons, two covenants, two mountains, two cities, and two conditions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two mothers</th>
<th>Hagar</th>
<th>Sarah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two sons</td>
<td>Ishmael</td>
<td>Isaac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two covenants</td>
<td>Mosaic (law or works)</td>
<td>Abrahamic (promise or grace)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two mountains</td>
<td>Sinai</td>
<td>Zion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two cities</td>
<td>Earthly Jerusalem</td>
<td>Heavenly Jerusalem</td>
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<td>Tow conditions</td>
<td>Bondage</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
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The analogy is complex. The two mothers (Hagar and Sarah) with their two sons (Ishmael and Isaac), stand for two covenants (a covenant of works and a covenant of grace), which correspond to two cities (the present Jerusalem and the Jerusalem above).

Hagar and Ishmael represent the covenant of law and works, and Sarah and Isaac represent the covenant of grace and faith. The covenant of promise is distinguished by two things. Firstly, *it requires nothing from man for its fulfillment.* At no point in God’s dealings with the patriarchs did He make His promised blessings conditional on any human act. Of course, the promises, once made, were received by faith, and that faith was counted for righteousness. The second distinguishing mark of the new covenant is *its spiritual nature,* it is fulfilled not by the endeavor of man but by the indwelling of the Spirit.

By contrast, the other covenant of which Paul speaks, in the Sarah-Hagar allegory, is a covenant of works. Under this covenant God makes known what He requires of man (whether through the written law or conscience or natural revelation) and man seeks (and even promises) to satisfy those requirements, so as to attain to righteousness and the blessing of God. In the covenant with Abraham, it was God who made the promises; in the covenant of works it is man who makes them! Accordingly, God’s blessings under such a covenant are conditional upon obedience and He justly condemns and punishes those who fail to satisfy its demands.
3. Hagar (4:25)

...for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—

a) Mt. Sinai

Hagar represented the Mosaic covenant. When Ishmael and Hagar were put out by Abraham they lived in the wilderness of Paran, which was in the Sinai Peninsula, in the desert outside the Promised Land. The descendents of Hagar through Ishmael eventually moved into the desert areas to the east and south of the Promised Land. They came to be known broadly as Arabs and their territory as Arabia. It is significant that Mount Sinai is located in what is still known today as the Arabian Peninsula.

Hagar stands for the old covenant, which God gave through Moses on Mount Sinai. The reason she is associated with Sinai probably has to do with geography. Hagar’s children, the Ishmaelites, were the Arabs who lived in and around the Sinai Peninsula. The old covenant came from Hagar’s territory. Hagar was the perfect woman to represent the old covenant. The old covenant meant slavery to the law, and she herself was a slave. Furthermore, all of her children were slaves like Ishmael. So anyone who is still in bondage to legalism is one of Hagar’s spiritual children. Anyone who reduces Christianity to a list of ‘do’s and don’ts’ is a slave like Ishmael.

Thus, Paul says, she was in bondage and lived outside the church. She lived near Sinai and so pictured the old covenant later given to Israel on that mountain. Thus the historical location of the bondwoman with her slave son in the wilderness outside of the land in the territory of Sinai graphically illustrates the spiritual state of people trying to accomplish salvation by human effort.

Because the terms of the Mosaic covenant were humanly impossible to keep, it produced a type of religious slaves, as it were, bound to a master from whom they could never escape. Anyone, including a Jew, who attempted to satisfy God and gain freedom from condemnation by trying to live up to that covenant in his own self-righteousness was spiritually like a child of Hagar, the bondwoman. He was a slave, struggling for a freedom he could not obtain by his own efforts.

How are men brought into bondage by the law? By the endless and futile search for obedience to that law: endless, because it is a task from which a man can never rest; futile, because everything man does is tainted by sin and cannot therefore satisfy God.

b) Jerusalem

Paul refers to the first Jerusalem as ‘present,’ showing he has in mind the earthly, historical city by that name. Just as God chose Mount Sinai as the geographical location to give the Old Covenant to Moses, He chose Jerusalem as the geographical location where the Old Covenant would be upheld, propagated, and exemplified. In this illustration both locations represent the Old Covenant of law and works and the bondage they produce.

‘The Jerusalem that now is’ refers not primarily to a geographical location, or even a political center, but rather to the religious system of Judaism that was based there. Thus Paul uses Hagar as a simultaneous picture of the Sinaitical covenant and the Judaistic ‘nation.’ The people are in bondage to the covenant. The Jewish nation as a whole, and the Judaizers in particular, were subject to this bondage through their pursuit of the law, asserts the apostle. But they are not alone! Every religion that teaches its adherents to perform deeds, of whatever kind, in order to obtain salvation, is likewise a prison. This is true, even if the work required is to ‘believe,’ or
‘trust,’ or ‘commit,’ or ‘surrender.’ As long as these things are undertaken in the strength of human nature, and not in the enabling power of the Spirit, they are just as truly ‘works’ as are penances and pilgrimages. The false idea that salvation can be obtained by such works is rightly called ‘legalism.’

When Paul mentioned Jerusalem, he was speaking not only geographically, but also spiritually. Jerusalem stands for God’s people. In this case, it refers especially to the Jews and to the Judaism of Paul’s day—the institution of Jewish religion. Paul may also have mentioned Jerusalem because this is where the Judaizers came from. The Jewish legalists who wanted the Galatians to add the law to the gospel came from the mother church in Jerusalem. And when Paul said that Jerusalem corresponded to Hagar, he was saying that although the Judaizers were Jews, they were really Ishmaelites, spiritually speaking! This was the shocker, like calling a Jew a Gentile, or an Israeli an Arab. The Judaizers prided themselves on being the true sons of Abraham. Paul admitted that they were children of Abraham, but he said that they were spiritually illegitimate. He reasoned that since they were giving up the gospel to go back under the law, they must be sons of Hagar rather than children of Sarah. This means that they were still in spiritual bondage. The same is true of anyone who seeks to be justified by keeping the law.

Ezekiel and Jeremiah taught that Jerusalem was predestined to become derelict and desolate. This first happened in the Babylonian captivity and it would happen again soon after Paul wrote, because of her rejection of the Messiah (cp. Mt. 24:2). Therefore, the Jerusalem of Paul’s day was a picture of Mt. Sinai and bondage. If the Galatians turn to Judaism, they will be returning to bondage. As Jerusalem is to be cast off, they will be cast off as well if they apostatize.

4. Sarah (4:26-27)

a) Jerusalem Above (4:26)

…but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.

In a similar way, Sarah pictures the covenant of promise which also gives birth to a people, but this nation, by contrast, is free! As with Hagar, the double identification emphasizes that covenant and people are inseparable. The heavenly Jerusalem referred to here is the church of Jesus Christ. The church only exists because of God’s eternal covenant in Christ. This city is founded on the covenant of promise, which has its fulfillment in the new covenant made in the blood of Christ. The inhabitants of this city are therefore ‘children of promise’ (v. 28), being born spiritually in accordance with the covenant of promise in Christ. She is ‘the mother of us all’ in the sense that the church embraces believing Jews and Gentiles alike.

Next, Paul demonstrates that physical Jerusalem has been replaced by the church. Their corporate identity is the heavenly Jerusalem, that is, the church of Jesus Christ. The church has become God’s Jerusalem. Mt. Zion serves as a type of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we are Abraham’s seed, the new Israel, we are God’s holy city, Jerusalem. This is the other part of the spiritual lesson: the church is the heavenly Jerusalem, represented by Sarah and Isaac, the free born son of promise. Paul declares that the church is the mother of the elect. God begets His people to Himself through the church.

The fact that the two covenants give birth to two distinct nations is central to Paul’s argument. It is impossible, argues the apostle, to belong to both of these nations at the same time. We cannot simultaneously be under the law and under grace. We are either children of the earthly
Jerusalem, in bondage to a fruitless religion of works; or we are children of the heavenly Jerusalem, and enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God. We are either slaves like Ishmael, or heirs like Isaac.

Paul’s argument is not some ill-founded, illegitimate allegory, but a historically based analogy. The writer to the Hebrews also links the old covenant church with Sinai and the new covenant church with Jerusalem above, Mt. Zion, the city of God (cp. Heb. 12:18-24). One day the heavenly Jerusalem will descend to earth (Rev. 21-22); but it already exists, even more surely and eternally than the present, earthly Jerusalem.

Notice that Paul does not speak chronologically, saying, ‘the Jerusalem to come.’ Instead he speaks spatially, saying, ‘the Jerusalem above.’ This is because the New Jerusalem is not just for the future. God has already started to build His eternal city. The ‘new’ Jerusalem has replaced the ‘now’ Jerusalem. The spiritual Jerusalem has superseded the earthly Jerusalem in the plan of God. Anyone who receives Jesus as Savior and Lord is a son or daughter of Sarah, a true child of Abraham. If we belong to God’s family in this way, we are free in Christ. We are citizens of the New Jerusalem and enjoy the freedom of that eternal city. Those who try to justify themselves by keeping the law are the slave children of Hagar, but those who are justified by faith in Christ are God’s free sons and daughters.

b) The Barren Rejoices (4:27)

For it is written:

‘Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband.’

Paul proves this part of the analogy (the church is the mother of the elect) by quoting from Isaiah 54:1. As Sarah received a son supernaturally, the church shall grow supernaturally. Notice the appropriateness of this proof text. What kind of woman was Sarah? She was a barren woman. The child of promise did not come through her ability to conceive. Only at the appointed time did God give her the promised son, who was the heir of the promise. And thus is it not fitting that Sarah is a spiritual picture of the church, with her free born sons and daughters, who have been saved by faith in the promise?

The words of Isaiah 54 were originally written to cheer the Jewish exiles in Babylon but are here applied to Sarah, the barren woman whose barrenness seemingly stood as an impenetrable barrier to the fulfillment of God’s promise to her husband, Abraham. As freedom and greater fruitfulness came again to the nation in Babylonian captivity, so it would come to the people in captivity to the law and its death penalty.

When Isaiah prophesied about the barren woman, he was not thinking primarily about Sarah, but of the city of Jerusalem. The ‘now’ Jerusalem of his day was barren because her children had been carried away into exile. But Isaiah promised that one day God would establish a ‘new’ Jerusalem, which would be filled with far more children than the old Jerusalem could ever contain. Isaiah’s happy promise is being fulfilled at this very moment, not in an earthly city, but
in a spiritual one that spreads across the globe. As men, women, and children come to faith in Jesus Christ, they become citizens of the New Jerusalem, to the praise and glory of God.

Sarah’s inability to bear children pictures the inability of man to bring himself to life spiritually. If men were left to themselves, none would be saved. But what is impossible with man is possible with God.

C. The Contemporary Application (Gal. 4:28-31)

It is not enough to claim Abraham as our father, as the Judaizers did, because Abraham had two sons, and only one of them was free. Therefore the crucial question becomes, ‘Who is your mother?’

1. Son of the Freewoman (4:28, 31)

*Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.... So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.*

Again addressing the Galatian believers as ‘brethren’ (cp. 1:11; 4:12), Paul tells them that, like Isaac, they are ‘children of promise.’ Every believer, like Isaac, is supernaturally conceived, miraculously born, and the offspring of God’s promise to Abraham fulfilled in Christ. God’s promise to Abraham is not simply for the Jews as Jews. Rather, it is for every believer, whether Jew or Gentile. Anyone who has faith in Jesus is God’s true child in the line of Isaac, born again free by the promise of God.

The Galatians, like Isaac, were products of grace. They were born of God and not of the flesh. All those who cling to Christ alone are children of the freewoman and part of God’s church. If they resort to human effort they will become children of bondage and be put out.

2. Son of the Bondwoman (4:29-30)

   a) Persecution (4:29)

*But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now.*

One implication of belonging to God’s family is that we are likely to get persecuted. Here again, Paul’s argument is based on history. When Abraham held a feast to celebrate Isaac’s weaning, Ishmael mocked the occasion (Gen. 21:9). He hated Isaac just as his mother hated Sarah (Gen. 16:4-5). Although they were born fourteen years apart, the two siblings were rivals. Ishmael, who was seventeen at the time, was not just teasing his little half-brother, he was treating him with contempt.

‘So it is now also,’ Paul told the Galatians. Paul’s point was that Christians should expect exactly the same kind of treatment that Isaac received from his big brother. In fact, it was happening in Galatia. The sons of Hagar were persecuting the sons of Sarah. Jews were persecuting Christians, and the Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus Christ were being oppressed by the Judaizers, who would not let them live by God’s free grace.

Throughout history, and still today, they physical and spiritual descendents of Hagar and Ishmael have, respectively, opposed and persecuted the physical and spiritual descendents of Sarah and Isaac. Those who hold to salvation by works, trusting in their own performance of the law, hate those who proclaim salvation by grace without works. Whether within Judaism or Christianity,
legalists have always been persecutors. Those who trust in God have always been persecuted by those who trust in themselves.

\[ b) \text{ Excommunication (4:30)} \]

_Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.'_

Ishmael never received his father’s inheritance, even though Abraham asked God to give it to him (Gen. 17:18). God blessed Ishmael in many ways, but He never gave him the promise of salvation, which was only for Isaac. When Paul quoted Sarah’s words (Gen. 21:10), it was a not-too-subtle way of saying that the Galatians needed to drive the Judaizers and their legalism right out of the church. By trying to place Gentiles under the law, they proved that they themselves were actually slaves, spiritually speaking, and therefore had no part in God’s inheritance. If salvation comes by grace, then the church cannot tolerate salvation by works. Freedom in Christ can be preserved only by abolishing bondage to the law.

As Ishmael persecuted Isaac, the Judaizers were persecuting those who held to justification by grace alone. What was the result? Ishmael was put out of the church. When Ishmael mocked Isaac, God confirmed the request of Sarah that Ishmael be put out of the house, which was the church at that time. Consequently, the son of the bondwoman had no place in the church and those who resort to works for part of their acceptance with God will have no place in the church either. Law and grace are such mutually exclusive principles that the former must be ‘cast out’ (along with those who teach it!) if the latter is to be received.

The spiritual children of Sarah and Isaac will receive an inheritance that the spiritual children of Hagar and Ishmael will not. The persecutors are going to be thrown out, and the persecuted will receive their promised and rightful inheritance. As Sarah had Hagar and Ishmael ‘cast out’ of Abraham’s household (Gen. 21:10-14), so will their unbelieving descendants, those who live by works of the flesh, be cast out of God’s household (cp. Mt. 7:22-23; 25:41). No one outside the covenant of grace will receive anything from God.

This is why we cannot be saved through any other religion except Christianity. The other religions—such as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Mormonism—are all slave religions. The same may even be said of versions of Christianity—such as Roman Catholicism and liberal Protestantism—that add works to faith as the basis for our righteousness before God. They bring bondage to human regulations because ultimately they are about what we do for God, not about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

For next time: Read Galatians 5:1-12.