

Freedom in Christ

In the first four chapters of Galatians, Paul defends his apostleship as being from God, and not from man in Galatians 1 and 2. He then defends the teaching that the gospel he proclaims is a gospel of justification by faith in Christ, and not by the Law of Moses in chapters 3 and 4. In defending the gospel of justification by faith in Christ, Paul makes five arguments, beginning with a personal argument using the Galatians' own experience in Galatians 3:1-5. He then cites a Scriptural argument, the testimony of the Old Testament, in Galatians 3:6-25. He follows that with a practical argument, detailing how one becomes a son and an heir of God in Galatians 3:26-4:4. Paul moves from the practical to the sentimental, appealing to their relationship the Galatians had with Paul in Galatians 4:8-20. This, then, brings us to the focus of today's lesson, which is the allegorical argument Paul espouses in Galatians 4:21-31 [ESV]. In counteracting the Galatian churches' willingness to go back into the bondage of the Law of Moses, the Apostle Paul says to them:

²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷For 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.”

²⁸Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But 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.” ³¹So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

An allegory is “a figurative representation conveying a meaning other than and in addition to the literal.” The allegory of Hagar and Sarah is written to persuade us (along with the Galatians) not to follow the Judaizers into slavery with Hagar and Ishmael, but to follow Sarah and Isaac into freedom. It is important to note that Paul does not deny the actual historical narrative, but he simply uses it in an allegorical sense to illustrate his point for the benefit of his readers who are tempted to go under the burden of the law. And that is exactly how Paul viewed

the Law of Moses: compared to the liberty of the New Covenant of Christ, it was a great burden!

Paul applied an allegorical interpretation to the historical narrative of Hagar and Sarah, not treating that narrative as an allegory in itself, but simply using the historical events of the past to teach a very important lesson to the churches in Galatia. To better understand Paul's allegorical argument, perhaps it is best to first review the historical events surrounding Sarah and Hagar. Sarah, who was barren, had a handmaiden named Hagar (Genesis 16:1). Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to bear a child in her place, and Abraham took Hagar as his wife (Genesis 16:2-3).

Hagar conceived and began to despise her mistress, Sarah (Genesis 16:4). Out of feelings of anger and jealousy, Sarah dealt harshly with Hagar (Genesis 16:5-6). Hagar fled the household, and the Lord intervened, telling her to return to Abraham and Sarah, and to submit to her mistress, Sarah. Hagar returns and subsequently bears a son to Abraham, named Ishmael (Genesis 16:7-16). Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born. It is at this point that God promises to Abraham that Sarah will have a son (Genesis 17:15-17). God confirms the covenant will be through Isaac, not Ishmael (Genesis 17:18-21). Sarah bears Isaac as God promised (Genesis 21:1-8). Once again, there is trouble in the household as Ishmael makes fun of his younger brother when Isaac was being weaned, so Sarah had Abraham send Hagar away this time (Genesis 21:9-14).

Paul continues the historical review by reminding the Galatians that Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac (Galatians 4:21-22). One (Ishmael) was born of a slave woman (Hagar) (Galatians 4:22b). The other son, Isaac, was born of a free woman (Sarah) (Galatians 4:22b). The son of the slave was born of the flesh (Galatians 4:23a). This means Ishmael's conception was natural from the result of Abraham coupling with Hagar.

The son of the free woman was born through the promise of God (Galatians 4:23b). Isaac's conception was by God's power. This is really brought out and can be seen in the following passages of Scripture from both the *Book of Genesis* and the *Book of Hebrews*.

1. The LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as He had promised. 2. And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. (Genesis 21:1-2 [RSV])

11. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered Him faithful Who had promised. 12. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. (Hebrews 11:11-12 [RSV])

I want to make a point here, a point not directly on topic this morning, but a very important point, nonetheless. While engaging this past Sunday morning in the adult Bible study from the fourth chapter of the Apostle Paul's *Epistle to the Galatians* regarding the allegory of Sarah and Hagar, our attention was turned to the events transpiring in Genesis 18 when Hagar, Sarah's slave handmaiden from Egypt, was given to Abraham as his wife to help in procuring the promised heir for Abraham. I have read the Bible through from front to cover many times in my life, but it still never ceases to surprise me every so often. Such was the case last Sunday, for I saw something in it, something important, that previously had escaped my attention. This is why it is so very important to be vigilant about our personal examination of God's word, which means we should study all of it, because all of it is important. We never know where we will find something that is applicable and has a large bearing on our own lives and upon our own society and culture in which we live today.

Take, for example, the subject of abortion. Does God really have anything to say about it? Yes, He does! In Genesis 18:10 and in Genesis 18:14, the Lord Himself says, ***"I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son,"*** and ***"Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."*** God was telling Abraham and Sarah that He was going to bless their union in their old age and give them the promised son they so longed to have.

So what is it about these two verses that so caught my attention? It is the fact that God said He was going to visit Sarah again ***"according to the time of life."*** That is what is so key here, and that was what was so eye opening when I read it last week, for the next time we see the Lord visiting Sarah is in Genesis 21:1-2: ***1. And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as He had spoken. 2. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.*** God had told Abraham and Sarah that He would visit Sarah again ***"according to the time of life."*** When we come to chapter 21, God answers and settles the question once and for all time as to when it is that life begins: It begins at the point of conception, ***"according to the time of life."***

In a day and age in which we live where information of all kinds is available to us with but a few, quick strokes from our computer's keyboard, or through a click or two of our computer's mouse, it is unfathomable that there would still be any confusion as to when life begins. And in spite of how far we have come in so many ways as a people, we are still living in the Dark Ages when it comes to abortion, and performing the most horrid, harsh and cruelly inflicted punishments imaginable that would have made our most bloodthirsty Medieval ancestors proud upon those who are the least and most innocent among us: The infant in its mother's womb. Ripped limb from limb, or having its tiny skull crushed, or its

little body burnt through the injection of a strong saline solution, this is the fate that awaits millions of the unborn each and every year. Yes, we have politicians and elected officials in the highest of offices who do not have the wisdom, the *pay grade*, as they say, to determine when life begins, and yet they support the slaughter of innocents through abortion in spite of their inability to know when life begins. Maybe it is time we as a people turned to the One Who is able to make that determination, since He already has. Let us all choose to follow the leadership of the One Whose knowledge and righteousness is above all pay grades, the One Who has already provided the answer: Life begins at the point of conception, ***“according to the time of life.”***

Just as God had promised, so did He fulfill, and Abraham and Sarah were blessed with the birth of Isaac. Paul now applies the allegorical elements of the two women, Sarah and Hagar, to the two covenants: the Law of Moses, and the Law of liberty in Jesus Christ (Galatians 4:24-27). Hagar represents Mount Sinai in Arabia, bearing children for slavery. She corresponds to present Jerusalem and the nation of Israel, which rejected their promised Messiah, and had Him crucified. She (Jerusalem) is in slavery with her children, and will be, as long as they reject Jesus Christ.

Sarah, however, represents the New Jerusalem above, meaning Heaven, and those who are free in Christ have a citizenship there and a home that awaits us after our sojourning here on Earth is completed. She (Jerusalem above) is 'our mother,' the mother to all who have been born again in Jesus Christ. She who was barren is no longer desolate.

Those in Christ are like Isaac (Galatians 4:28-31). They, too, are children of promise. Those born of the flesh, too, have persecuted them. Ishmael, born of the flesh, persecuted Isaac, who was born according to promise. Judaizing teachers, born of the flesh, persecuted Christians who are reborn according to the Spirit.

The Scriptures portend what will be the end of both. The son of the slave woman (i.e., Judaizing teachers) will not inherit with the son of the free woman (i.e., those who are in Christ). Those who are reborn of the promise in Christ are children of the free woman (Heaven above). They are not of the slave (present Jerusalem, with the Law of Moses).

Paul said in Romans 8:2 [RSV], ***“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.”*** So what does this mean? It means that when we are reborn in Jesus Christ, we receive His Spirit, and this is what sets us free from the law of sin (the Law of Moses) and the law of death. We no longer have to fear death! So why would anyone want to go back to the chains of the laws from which Christ's sacrifice freed us?

Paul clearly taught in Romans 3:23 that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. He also clearly stated what the wages are for those sins when he wrote in Romans 6:23 [RSV], **“For the wages of sin is death...”** Death awaits all who sin and remain in rebellion against the Creator of the universe. But in that very same verse in which Paul states the wages of sins, he also added, **“but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

It is only through the intervention of God that mankind has the hope of salvation. It is only because of His great love for mankind that He sent us His very own Son to be the sacrifice on our behalf, and to suffer the punishment that was due us. If Jesus lives in us, then we no longer live according to the sinful nature of mankind. Paul adds in Romans 8:3-6 [RSV],

3. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4. in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

The sinful mind is hostile to God and His nature. In fact, it is downright at enmity with the Lord. So why, Paul pleads to the Galatians, would any of you want to go back into the bondage of the Law of Moses, and into the slavery of sin and death when you have been freed from all of it through Jesus Christ and the grace of God? Jesus Christ entered humanity as a gift from God, and what did He do when He got here? **3. He condemned sin in the flesh, 4. in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.** Here is the key. We have got to live, therefore, not according to our sinful nature, but according to the Spirit of Jesus Christ. We must allow Him to live in us. We must reject all of those who would have us believe we earn our salvation through the keeping of laws.

But in Jesus Christ true freedom, true liberty, is found. Paul says in Romans 8:9-14 [ESV],

9. But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him. 10. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. 11. If the Spirit of Him Who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He Who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through His Spirit which dwells in you. 12. So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – 13. for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the

body you will live. 14. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary, but He was resurrected through the power of God. Now if Jesus was raised from the dead, what does that mean for us? It means that we can be raised from the dead, also. It means that we can be raised from the death of our sinfulness, into a new righteousness, and into a holiness that emanates from God Himself.

The allegory of Sarah and Hagar is a brilliant illustration that aptly demonstrates the utter futility the Galatians were undertaking in following the Judaizers' teaching, and returning to the Law of Moses for justification. Thus, Paul rightly illustrates why the Galatians should not heed the Judaizing teachers for it would be a return to slavery (to the Law of Moses). They would be turning their back on and rejecting the Spirit Who conceived them. Paul told Titus in Titus 3:3-7 [RSV],

3. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; 4. but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5. He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, 6. Which He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7. so that we might be justified by His grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

Returning to the Law of Moses would be turning away from the promises of Heaven as described by the writer of the *Book of Hebrews*:

22. But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable Angels in festal gathering, 23. and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in Heaven, and to a Judge Who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24. and to Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. 25. See that you do not refuse Him Who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on Earth, much less shall we escape if we reject Him Who warns from Heaven. (Hebrews 12:22-25 [RSV])

Our threat today might not be from Judaizing teachers, but there are those who would have us turn away from Christ. There will be those voices in the world promoting false religions, but the end result would be the same. It will only lead to a return to slavery (John 8:31-34). By following after these false teachers we will fall short of receiving the promises of Christ (Hebrews 4:1-2; Hebrews 4:11).

Only by our remaining in Christ can we be the free children of promise, with Jerusalem above as our true mother! (Revelation 2:10; Revelation 3:12)