

Bethel Christian Church

Galatians

Study 17

Justification by Grace, Children of Promise

(Galatians 4:21- 5:1)

And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise

We sayings like, “Johnny is a very promising child”, or, “Russell is a very promising footballer” and so on. We mean that they show aptitude and application. But when Paul said to the Galatians, *And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise*, he was not using promise in this way. Isaac may or may not have been a promising child, but he was totally the product of God’s intervention not any aptitude or application shown by himself, his father or his mother.

Paul used the story of Isaac’s birth to Sarah and Ishmael’s birth to Hagar as an allegory in two ways. The first is bondage and freedom as it plays out through the history of God’s people, and the second those who live under slavery of attempting justification through the law will always attack and persecute the free ones.

An allegory is a story in which people, things or happenings have a symbolic meaning reaching beyond their initial significance. Paul did not use the story of Sarah and Hagar as an illustration, but the revelation of a spiritual reality embodied in the history of salvation and so present in the Church at Galatia and today.

In choosing to follow the Judaizers from Jerusalem the Galatians were linking themselves with what had always been the way of slavery. Ever since the law was given at Sinai Israel had turned it into a way of slavery (Paul said that Sinai *gendered* slavery, literally gave birth to it in Israel’s experience). Hence Paul’s linking of Hagar the slave girl of Abraham and Sarah, Sinai and then current Jerusalem which had become the centre of Judaism.

The Rabbis of Judaism made much of this story. God’s promise, they taught, was secured for them because they were the descendants of Abraham (children of Sarah and not children of the slave girl Hagar). Paul, however, made the stunning claim that the Gentiles at Galatia were children of promise like Isaac. So the real principle of Isaac’s story was not his genealogy so much as his miraculous ‘creation’ by God as promised to Abraham, and the promised security of his family destiny in the hands of God.

To see the fullness of Paul’s allegory we will quickly revisit the original story. The beginning of Abraham’s relationship with God was totally of grace. God revealed his glory to Abraham the idolater. He then made a unilateral covenant with Abraham, promising to bless all the nations of the earth through him (Genesis 12:1-3); and make him the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5); and that kings would emerge from his fruitful family line (Genesis 17:6). God’s promise was to establish His covenant with Abraham eternally, to be Abraham’s God and the God of his descendants (Genesis 17:7). But as the years went by no descendants came. The covenant promise began to look threatened, even false to the eyes of sight. Childless and aging Abraham assumed that God’s promise meant that his servant Eliezer would inherit the covenant blessing. But God again spoke directly and promised Abraham and Sarah an heir (Genesis 15:1-4), followed by a ‘sacrament of grace’. Showing him the sparkling night sky, God promised that his descendants would number more than the stars he could count (Genesis 15:5). The point we make is that God’s grace and promise to Abraham were clear and formative from the beginning. The battle was at the point of trust. Was God as good as his word? Where that trust wavers hearts seek to establish security and a future through the *flesh*, (self-effort), (Galatians 4:21). Abraham longed for the future that God had

promised. But what he struggled with was that God alone must deliver him into that future, he couldn't get there by any other means. So His decision (along with Sarah) to have a child by Hagar their servant was not an act of trust but faithless reasoning.

So Paul links four things: Ishmael, (Hagar's child), Abraham's self-effort, attempting to use the law given at Mt Sinai to justify yourself and Jerusalem the current centre of slavery to the law. Whereas Sarah's child, Isaac, was born according to God's covenant of grace, by the Spirit of God not Abraham's effort, and is linked with *Jerusalem above* (the city which God forms by grace. A place where the people are free to worship because grace has transformed their hearts).

So the stunning, shocking revelation Paul brought through this allegory was that present Israel, including the Judaizers who came to Galatia, were actually children of Hagar, slaves to the law and self-effort. Whereas the Gentiles who trusted God's grace were like Isaac, children of God's promise.

This principal still applies. Where believers give way to trust and resort to faithless reason and self-effort to secure life with God law becomes paramount. Like Jerusalem of Paul's day spiritual laws for progress become important then binding and then deadening. The covenant of grace is treated as a covenant of works and the knowledge of the Father in Christ as full of grace and truth gives way to the fear that he is still keeping score of our performance. But Paul has a further point in his allegory.

The one born of the flesh (Ishmael) persecuted the one born of the Spirit (Isaac.

Freedom is a dangerous thing. It delivers a person to the place of full accountability and it inflames the one bound in slavery.

The covenant of grace delivers a sinner to the place where they may choose to love like Jesus loved. Those who belong to the *Jerusalem above* don't belong to a place of ideals and waffly principles of spirituality. They have been freed from guilt and thus freed from its power. Do they always behave sinlessly, no they don't. But nevertheless they have been given the grace of overcoming all the great enemies of sin, death, hell, the evil one, the flesh, the world etc. Yet the reaction of the world to one living and loving freely is never neutral or congenial. The anger against our Lord as he mixed with the 'Jerusalem' under law was vicious. Like Sarah Jesus life was fruitful. But this fruitfulness was not seen by those enveloped in the dead letter of the law. Legal bondage and freedom created by the Spirit cannot live together. The legal spirit demands that every last law be kept in order for the world to function properly and reach its goal. So we must be wise to see that as with Paul and the Galatians, the most difficult attacks will come not from those outside the church but the religious law-keepers in the nominal church.

Did the Galatians really comprehend what living under law meant? Did they listen to the law as it condemned? Could they, once liberated from its clutches now return to that trough of death? Could they return to the biting and devouring of angry, insecure 'servant slaves'? The Judaizers came persecuting Paul just as Hagar had persecuted Sarah. They had sought to tear away the church from Paul and his dangerous freedom. Yet it was Paul who returned their jaundice with love and fatherly compassion. Grace alone creates love and seeks with a passion to keep them from their deadly slide towards Hagar. It was Paul who called them brethren to overcome their suspicion, instead of laying down the law about how hurt he was. The 'law ones' deal in accusation and justice, in division and separation, in imagined holiness and trumpeted morality.

"Christ set you free for freedom", Paul cries out, not to return to Sinai. Cast away all that entail of Hagar and covenants of law. Cast yourself onto the promises of God. He alone can include you amongst his liberated children. There alone can love not law be central. There alone can love of God's law flourish.