

“Whose Child are You?”

Galatians 4:21-31

The last time we were in Galatians we stopped at 4:20. So let's review the letter and bring us up to 4:20. Paul wrote to the Galatian churches (his first letter) in 48-49 AD in between his first and second missionary journeys. His first journey was with Barnabas recorded for us in Acts 13-14. During his journeys, Paul would look for a synagogue to preach from because many Jews had not accepted Jesus as Messiah. Sometimes Paul would get kicked out of the synagogues, even beaten and chased out of town. Other times he was welcomed. What usually got him in trouble was telling the Jews that 1) Jesus was alive and He was the Messiah and 2) God was extending His promises to the Gentiles.

From Acts 10-12 we see the first real spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. It was initially difficult for the apostle Peter and the others to understand God was reaching Gentiles too with the same message but God assured Peter through a dream and Paul too through his conversion experience, that the Gentiles would turn to Jesus. Many of the Jews were not willing to accept Gentile inclusion into the family of God. Some of them insisted that if Gentiles were going to be allowed into God's family that they had to be circumcised and observe the Sabbath, holy days and Jewish dietary laws.

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Jerusalem after their first missionary journey, they attended a large conference hosted by the apostles to settle this matter between Jew and Gentile. In Acts 15 we see they concluded that Gentiles were indeed coming to faith in Jesus, it was part of God's plan and that they didn't need to become 'Jewish' to be included in the 'Way', which was what the church was first called.

In spite of the general agreement about Gentile inclusion, some Jews were still not happy. They insisted that Gentiles must follow the Law as well. Some Judaizers followed hard after the heels of Paul and went into the churches he planted after he left, and persuaded some of the Gentiles that Paul was not quite honest in the gospel. As a result, some of these Gentiles became circumcised and started observing the Law, which was confusing. So Paul begins his letter with great exasperation:

1:6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

Then over in 3:1 he wrote,

3:1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

And again he says in 5:7,

5:7 You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?

And so the rest of his letter Paul defends the gospel saying, 'No, Jesus alone saves you by the grace of God.' The letter to the Galatians is Paul addressing the error, correcting it with proper biblical teaching and encouraging the Galatians that Jesus has freed you from sin's power and penalty therefore live for Christ in the Spirit's power not by your own works.

How was Paul doing that? In his introduction, Paul had to defend his apostleship. Most likely these Judaizers painted Paul as anti-Jewish, who even though he had been raised up according to the Laws of Moses, now having accepted Jesus as the Messiah, Paul was abandoning these laws. How can he be a true believer if he rejects the Laws God gave Moses! But Paul very clearly shows he was sent to share the gospel by the authority of God and had a personal visitation from Jesus. How he even confronted the apostle Peter who showed favouritism to the Jews one time. In addition, he has been explaining to them that just because you're Jewish doesn't mean you are a 'true' child of Abraham (Jesus had these same arguments with the Jewish leaders who trusted that their Jewishness was what made them right with God).

Here in 4:21-31 Paul summarizes the difference between following the Law versus living by grace, using God's work with Abraham as an illustration between Law and grace. Paul issues this challenge to those who were being swayed to live by the Mosaic Law even though they had said they believed in Jesus.

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?

He's already spoke to this back in Ch. 3:10;

¹⁰ All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹¹ Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." ¹² The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." ¹⁴ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

He also pointed out that the Law could only take you so far. Ch. 3:23

²³ Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

The Law had its purpose: to show how we can't come to God on our own. We need a mediator, a sacrifice. We are sinners, we keep sinning, and no animal sacrifice can pay that price. But, until the time when Christ came who could pay that price, God allowed the Law system to provide temporary forgiveness. Even then, you had to believe by faith that God would accept your sacrifice.

Here in 4:21-31 Paul tries one more analogy to help them understand that trying to obey the sacrificial and ceremonial laws does not earn anyone salvation. Once more, he goes back to Abraham only this time he uses his sons Ishmael and Isaac to illustrate the difference between Law and Grace. He calls it an 'allegory' in v.24, which doesn't mean spiritualizing everything so that we have no idea how we got that. It means likeness, comparison to make a point. And the point comes from the Law itself, here mostly referring to the first 5 books of the Bible. "For it is written" meaning, here's what we know for sure. Using Ishmael and Isaac, Paul is going to make a comparison between Law and Grace and with that analogy show how badly the Law fails to make one right with God. Sadly, we are still fighting this battle in our world. Many people are following a Law like path in order to get right with God when God has clearly shown, we can't on our own. We can, only if we accept His gift in Jesus. And we who already know these things need to hear them again so we know how to show Law-followers the errors of Law-keeping and find hope in grace through faith in Jesus.

²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. ²³ His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

Paul doesn't need to review the story; all his hearers know it. Abraham had many sons but the illustration comes from the first two, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael's mother was Hagar, Abraham and Sarah's slave. Sarah of course was Abraham's wife, a free woman who gave birth to Isaac. Ishmael was born first when Sarah, out of impatience in waiting for God's promise to come true about her and Abraham having a son and eventually many descendants so that Abraham would fulfil the meaning of his name, 'father of nations'. Hagar and Ishmael represent the Law while Sarah and Isaac represent grace. Why?

Law – Hagar was a slave ***Grace – Sarah was free***

Both Ishmael and Isaac were Abraham's sons. Only one could be the heir of God's promises to Abraham that He would bless him and that the nations of the world would be blessed through Abraham's descendant. Which one? Not Ishmael. Why?

Ishmael - born of the flesh ***Isaac – born of promise***

God promised Abraham and Sarah they would have a son and he would be the one through whom God would bring blessing to the nations. Ishmael was a product of the flesh. Abraham, by Sarah's suggestion based on the ways of the world system, suggested Abraham impregnate Hagar through whom they would have a son. There was nothing special about this birth. They produced the boy. But Isaac was promised by God and Sarah eventually conceived way beyond childbearing years and miraculously gave birth to Isaac. God even told Abraham and Sarah what to name him, Isaac, which means laughter because he will bring joy in your old age.

When people try to earn their way to God by the works of their flesh, it is their doing and theirs alone. It is their own way in how to get right with God. Our good works do not bring about the Spirit's presence in our life. Salvation is by faith through a miraculous, spiritual birth. God does it in us when we believe His promise to us that through faith in Christ our sins are graciously forgiven, the Spirit graciously comes into our life and our hearts are graciously changed. Being born from above is a spiritual, miraculous gift of God through faith in what He says. Abraham believed God and that faith resulted in God declaring him right with Him. Same holds for us today (Rom. 4).

Paul says; let's think of it in another way. Think of Hagar and Sarah as representatives to the two types of covenants God made with Moses and Abraham.

Mosaic covenant ***Abrahamic Covenant***

When God gave Moses the commandments and the Laws in Exodus 20ff, it was a conditional covenant, a two-sided covenant where both parties had their part to play. God said I will give you the land to enjoy but if you fail to obey Me and don't follow other gods, you will stay in the land and enjoy it. Yet as we know from the Old Testament, Israel abandoned God and did worship other gods and God did exactly what He promised in Deut. 28-29 which was to remove blessings of rain from the land and ultimately send them into exile away from the land.

However, with Abraham God made an unconditional covenant in Gen. 15. God alone walked between the cut in two animals. God said He would bless Abraham and the world through Abraham

and He did, and has. Abraham had believing faith, that is why God made the covenant with him. So the Mosaic covenant reminds us that when you try to follow the Law you only benefit if you keep the Law, all the time (which is impossible). But with grace, God initiated the covenant and God will keep His promises to bless and provide. God sent Jesus to die for us. God accepted His sacrifice. God accepts us who believe Jesus is the Son of God whose sacrifice gives us the promise of eternal life.

All religious Law keeping systems are performance based. They are fleshly based, man-made systems. They all have the premise that God will only bless you if you perform properly. This is the difference between Law and Grace. In a grace system, God initiates and sustains the covenant. Our responsibility is faith alone. Blessings are there for us through faith in Christ and God's promises. God comes down to us, not we try to get to God.

Paul shows the ramifications between Law and Grace with the next comparison. In v.25 he says let's compare Hagar to Mt. Sinai (where the Law was given) which declared Jerusalem as the place of worship, which at the time was under Roman rule.

One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.

In other words, Israel was still in slavery now under Rome. This is what the Law does for you, Paul was saying. It doesn't free you. But the future Jerusalem, the one that is with God above waiting to come down on the earth when Jesus defeats our enemies represents the freedom grace offers.

Roman-occupied Jerusalem

Future Jerusalem

The book of Hebrews made this clear in using Abraham and Sarah. In Heb. 11:9

⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Abraham never saw ancient Jerusalem for that matter. To live only for earth's blessings here will always let you down. That's what Law-keeping does, it's only for here not for the future. It has no future. At this point Paul quotes Is. 54:1 which begins,

Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD.

Remember, when a New Testament writer quotes a verse he is referring to the whole context of that verse. In Isaiah, God warned the Israelites that because of their rebellious nature He would send them into exile to Babylon. However, Ch. 54 is also the promise that God would bring them back. Here he describes them as barren now but will be fruitful in the future. The analogy Paul makes here is that Law-keeping only results in suffering and exile just as Israel was suffering under Roman occupied Jerusalem at the time. Law keeping, performance based religion

Keeps you in exile

Frees from exile

Whereas grace through faith in Christ frees you and gives you a future without exile. While there are blessings now in Christ the greatest blessings await us in the future Jerusalem, where suffering will be gone and exile is a thing of the past. As well, Paul continues with another analogy, remember how Ishmael treated Isaac?

²⁹ *At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.*

Law-keeping, performance-based, religion is always the
Persecutor **Persecuted**

And the grace through faith in Christ people are persecuted. Why? Because faith rattles the Law-keepers. They do not like our confidence, our hope, and our certainty about the future. They prefer a measurable religion, one that they can control by checking off their list of all the rites and performances they accomplish along the way, with the hope that God is keeping a similar report card that will produce an 'A' when they die and stand before God. So we who believe by faith in God's promises will be persecuted until our time is done here. However, when we die, we receive an inheritance where the Law-keepers will not.

No inheritance **Inheritance**

³⁰ *But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."* ³¹ *Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

Paul concludes his analogy reminding his readers in Galatia that there is no future for a works-based religious system. And there's no present either because you're always in bondage to your system of trying to keep up when there's no scorecard.

God doesn't keep a scorecard of our works. He doesn't have a ladder to heaven based on more good works than bad. The only thing law keeping does for you is sets you up for a big disappointment because it's all about you. And God's Word says, it's all about His Son Jesus. Have you accepted Jesus as your Saviour? Have you accepted His payment for your sins as the only way to get to God? Did you repent of your sins and accept God's grace and gift of salvation through Jesus?

Many of you have already. So how do we apply this passage? Two ways. One, equip yourselves with Paul's arguments about why Law-keeping doesn't save anyone. Be ready to defend the gospel and explain graciously how no one can come to God based on his or her own good works. Any human performance system will fail.

Secondly, be careful not to allow to sneak in a performance-based attitude to our faith. That we check off our lists; read my Bible today, check; prayed today, check; did a good deed, check, and forget about how faith please God not our activities. We can read our Bibles and not do anything about it. We can vaguely pray for blessings and rarely see the connection God makes in our day-to-day lives. We can go throughout our days never exercising genuine faith, where we have to wait on God to meet our needs, share the gospel with someone, or reject a sinful habit believing by faith God will make a way of escape and be our source for joy and not that sin.

'Get rid of the slave-woman and her son' because there is no future in that. Take some time this week and ask yourself, 'Am I living more by faith or more by performance?' Do I expect God to bless me based on performance or am I just living by faith leaving Him to bless me however He chooses? Remember that when Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4 who said 'The righteous will live by faith' he was referring to the daily lifestyle and outcome of the one who believes by faith in God's promise to save us through Jesus Christ. Pray that we, who have been declared righteous by our faith in

Jesus Christ alone, will continue to live by faith and show our lost neighbours, family and friends how faith is the only way to God.

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If you have any questions or comments about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net