

CHILDREN OF THE FREE WOMAN

Galatians 4:21-31

Introduction:

Our text this morning this morning ends with the words, “So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.” But immediately Paul goes on to say – *read 5:1*.

Freedom – it is what we have been called to. But what really is freedom. I think it would be good to consider that for a moment. The dictionary defines freedom this way:

The quality or state of being free: as

a: the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action

b: liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another

In other words, freedom is having the ability act on your own, not under coercion or the authority of another person or rule. But there is something very important that we must understand about freedom. True freedom is what will produce unending joy for us.

Imagine being sixteen years old again. You have just passed your driving test and been issued a driver’s license. You even have a car. You are free. You have wonderful freedom. You can now drive anywhere you want, any way you want, any time you want. Or can you...?

If you decide that you are free to drive south on the northbound lanes of the QE2, you will soon find out that you are not free anymore. At best it will result in a fine, at worst death for yourself and perhaps others.

John Piper makes an interesting statement regarding this idea of freedom. He says there are four stages of freedom on the way to the full freedom all of us long for: the *freedom of opportunity* to do what we can, the *freedom of ability* to do what we desire, and the *freedom of desire* to do what will bring us *unending joy*. In order to be fully free, it is not enough to have opportunity, ability, and desire to act. The acts you desire and perform have to lead to life and joy, not destruction.

Often Christians, particularly as young people, envy the freedom they see in the world—freedom to enjoy the exhilaration of all that money can buy, sex, drugs, parties. But it is not real freedom if it leads to destruction.

Paul’s argument in this passage is that God has called us to freedom—true freedom. He wants us to know the freedom that leads to eternal joy, not just temporary excitement.

Understanding the Law and Freedom

We need to see what the law really says about bondage and freedom. Paul begins with a question – *read v. 21*.

There is a play on words here – the “law” can mean the commandments given by God to Moses during the wilderness wanderings (which the Galatians misguidedly are being led to try to obey in their totality), but it can also refer to the first five books of the Bible as a whole.

We are then pointed back to what Moses tells us about slavery and freedom. Abraham had two sons – Ishmael and Isaac. – *Read v. 22-23*.

Notes on the sequence of events:

- God’s call and promise to Abraham – Gen. 12 (Ab. was 75 yrs. old)
- Promise restated after separation from Lot – Gen. 13:14-17
- Abraham’s question about Eliezer; God establishes the covenant – Gen. 15 (Abr is approx. 85 yrs old)
- Abraham and Sarah become impatient and take matters into their own hands – Gen. 16
- Hagar gives birth to Ishmael (Abr was 86 years old)
- God visits Abraham again and renews the covenant, assuring him that Ishmael is not to be his heir. He again promises him a son to be born the next year – Gen 17.

Back to Gal. 4:23 – Ishmael, who was born to Hagar, was born according to the flesh – man’s attempt to fulfil God’s promise. Isaac, who was born to Sarah, was born through promise. He was the result of God’s work and God’s word. Hagar was a slave and her son was born out of bondage to sin. Sarah was a free woman and her son was born in freedom as a result of promise.

So in the Law (the Torah – the books of Moses) we have presented two sons – a son of slavery and a son of promise. Now, Paul says, there is a deeper meaning to all this.

Understanding the Significance of Hagar & Sarah

Verse 24 – “Now this may be interpreted allegorically...” (AV – an allegory; NIV – figuratively; NKJV – symbolic)

MacArthur points out that there are no true allegories in Scripture. He says: “An allegory is a fictional story where real truth is the secret, mysterious, hidden meaning. The story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac is actual history and has no secret or hidden meaning. Paul uses it only as an illustration to support his contrast between law and grace.”

So, while it is not a true allegory, Paul says this whole story of Hagar and Sarah and their sons illustrates an important point, and that is the contrast between law and grace, between human effort and the promise of faith. So let's try to break down what he says so we can understand.

Paul says these two women represent two covenants. The first one, Hagar, represents the covenant of law which was given through Moses at Mount Sinai. So we must consider how the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai is pictured by Hagar and her son, Ishmael, born through an affair with Abraham. Piper suggests there are two similarities, at least.

Hagar's giving birth to Ishmael is done "according to the flesh" (v. 23); Abraham and Hagar tried to get God's promised blessing by their own efforts rather than relying on God's supernatural enablement. That is exactly what happened when the law was given at Mt. Sinai. The law only led to trying to please God through the works of the flesh – self effort rather than faith. Instead of humbling themselves and trusting God for help to obey his commands, Israel says confidently, "All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 24:3; Deuteronomy 5:27). But they did not have hearts inclined to trust in God (Hebrews 4:2) or truly depend on him (Deuteronomy 5:29). And so like Hagar and Abraham they depended on their own resources. And just as Ishmael was born according to the flesh, so the law offered was not received be-

cause (as Romans 8:3 says) the law was "weakened by the flesh." All that Abraham and Hagar produced on their own was a son who would not be the heir. All that Israel produced when they tried to keep the law on their own was a legalism which would inherit nothing.

The second similarity between Hagar and Mt. Sinai is that both of them bear children for slavery. Verse 24 says that the covenant Hagar represents is from Mt. Sinai "bearing children for slavery." Since Ishmael was not accepted as an heir, he was no better than his mother, a slave. And when the Israelites take the law upon themselves without trusting God for gracious enablement, they become slaves because they have no freedom to do the law from the heart, and because their unbelief locks them into disobedience and excludes them from the inheritance.

Read v. 25 – the Law produces slavery, and the children of the law are the slaves of the law and of sin.

Now Paul turns to the other part of the illustration. He does not go into the same detail, but points immediately to the Jerusalem above – a reference to the spiritual Jerusalem and the life which is focused on heavenly things. Look at Colossians 3:1-3 – Read and comment briefly.

The Jerusalem above represents the dwelling place of God. Sarah represents that city because she gave birth to Isaac not by reliance on herself, or her own efforts, but by an act of God from above in fulfillment of his promise.

So, Paul says, like Isaac, we are children of promise. Why? Because we are building our life with God not on our own efforts, trying to keep the law, but on faith, trusting the promise of God that through Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed.

Verse 29 is a reminder of the conflict between the Law and the Promise. *Read it.* If I can refer to Piper again, he points out:

Recall how in verse 23 the contrast was between one born according to the flesh and one born through promise. But notice here in verse 29 that the same contrast is between one born according to the flesh and one *born according to the Spirit*. "Born according to the Spirit" is interchangeable with "born through promise." This confirms that "children of promise" in verse 28 refers to people whose inner life is the

work of God's Spirit in fulfillment of his promise. The difference between Ishmael-types, who seek to attain God's favor by their own efforts, and Isaac-types, who trust in the promise of God, is a supernatural work of the Spirit of God.

In verse 30, Paul out that the inheritance, the promise of God is not for the Ishmael-types. It is not for the Judaizers who are convinced that the way to satisfy God's requirements is to keep the Law. We see this illustrated even in the life of Hagar and Sarah. *Read v. 30.*

But the wonderful truth is that, as believers in the promise if God, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, we are children of the free woman.

Conclusion

So, keeping the law in an attempt to please God can never bring true freedom. We said at the beginning that in order to be truly free we must have the *freedom of opportunity* to do what we can, the *freedom of ability* to do what we desire, and the *freedom of desire* to do what will bring us *unending joy*.

The only way to have that freedom is to come to God on his terms. The Judaizers could not find that freedom. It was not because they rejected God, but because they wanted him on their terms, just like Abraham and Hagar tried to gain God's blessing on their own terms.

But we, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise (Galatians 4:28). We have been born of the Holy Spirit. We are born according to the Spirit and can say with Paul, It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.

That is true freedom. And as Paul says in 5:1 – *Read it.*