

LAW, LIBERTY, AND LIFE IN JESUS - Knowing How it all Works

Part sixteen - Teaching #2161

Sunday, February 6th, 2022 - 10 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

LIVING LIFE FREE IN CHRIST JESUS

Galatians 4:21-31 - “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, don’t you hear the law? [22] For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and the other by a free woman. [23] But the one by the slave was born as a result of the flesh, while the one by the free woman was born through promise. [24] These things are being taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai and bears children into slavery — this is Hagar. [25] Now Hagar represents Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. [26] But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. [27] For it is written, Rejoice, childless woman, unable to give birth. Burst into song and shout, you who are not in labor, for the children of the desolate woman will be many, more numerous than those of the woman who has a husband. [28] Now you too, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. [29] But just as then the child born as a result of the flesh persecuted the one born as a result of the Spirit, so also now. [30] But what does the Scripture say? “Drive out the slave and her son, for the son of the slave will never be a coheir with the son of the free woman.” [31] Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of a slave but of the free woman.”

Today’s text is one of the reasons we preachers shy away from preaching through an entire book of the Bible. Tough text, this one, to be sure.

What's more, we can't even imagine how shocking and distasteful these words from Paul would have been to the Jewish false teachers in Galatia. If there was one thing they took pride in, it was their descendancy from Abraham. Do you remember how Jesus encountered this ethnic pride in the Pharisees of His day?

IPAD TEXT - Luke 3:8 - "Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. And don't start saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones."

These Jewish leaders saw their whole identity bound up with their lineage traced back to Abraham. If you keep this in mind, you will see why these people saw red as Paul unfolded some key Old Testament truths in our text tonight, because he's going to trace their ancestry back to an entirely different source. Then he will draw out some very precise and demanding applications for all of us in the church today.

1) **PAUL GIVES A QUICK OVERVIEW OF SOME OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 4:21-23 - “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, don’t you hear the law? [22] For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and the other by a free woman. [23] But the one by the slave was born as a result of the flesh, while the one by the free woman was born through promise.”

Verse 21 is important because, in it, Paul removes grounds of any charge of antisemitism. He says he is merely drawing lessons from the Jewish Bible. Paul himself was a Jew, and he never denied or rescinded his Jewishness. The problem he saw with these Jewish false teachers was they weren’t loyal to their own Scriptures - ***“Tell me, you who want to be under the law, don’t you hear the law?”***

Then Paul reviews some basic Bible history from the Jewish Torah. His whole argument is going to be built upon the fact that Abraham had two sons - not just one. In fact, Abraham had eight sons in total, but Paul isn’t interested in all those details. His point is simply to establish that Abraham’s descendants came along two lines, not just one. He had descendants from Hagar, the slave woman, and Sarah, his wife, the free woman.

Just in case some have forgotten these events, let’s look at them quickly:

- a) *Abraham and Sarah had received the promise from God that they would be the progenitors of a great nation (Genesis 12:2), but were discouraged because they could see no way in which this could possibly happen.*

IPAD TEXT - Genesis 15:1-6 - "After these events, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield; your reward will be very great. [2] But Abram said, "Lord God, what can you give me, since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" [3] Abram continued, "Look, you have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house will be my heir." [4] Now the word of the Lord came to him: "This one will not be your heir; instead, one who comes from your own body will be your heir." [5] He took him outside and said, "Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "Your offspring will be that numerous." [6] Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

Abraham is willing to settle for Eliezer, his servant, substituting for an actual son. But God says, “No way. Your heir will be from your own body - your own son.” Don’t miss the important point here. God’s plan is to give Abraham a son ***precisely because it was impossible for this to happen without His divine provision.*** He wanted Abraham to be forced to rely totally on divine promise and divine enablement for this event to come about.

- b) ***In Genesis chapter 16 Abraham and Sarah, still weak in faith, devise a plan by which they will use their own resources to produce God’s promised heir.***

IPAD TEXT - Genesis 16:1-2,15 - “Abram’s wife, Sarai, had not borne any children for him, but she owned an Egyptian slave named Hagar. [2] Sarai said to Abram, “Since the Lord has prevented me from bearing children, go to my slave; perhaps through her I can build a family.” And Abram agreed to what Sarai said. [15] So Hagar gave birth to Abram’s son, and Abram named his son (whom Hagar bore) Ishmael.”

So we see that when Paul says in Galatians 4:23 that Ishmael was **“born according to the flesh,”** he means that he was the product of Abraham and Sarah’s own **self-reliance**. His birth was the exact opposite of trusting in God’s promise and provision to accomplish His Word. Ishmael was the result of Abraham’s own ingenuity and effort. He was not the child of promise.

- c) ***Fourteen years later, God renews His promise to Abraham of an heir, and again, Abraham has a hard time believing it.***

IPAD TEXT - Genesis 17:16-19 - “I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will produce nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”
[17] Abraham fell facedown. Then he laughed and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? Can Sarah, a ninety-year-old woman, give birth?” [18] So Abraham said to God, “If only Ishmael were acceptable to you!” [19] But God said, “No. Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will confirm my covenant with him as a permanent covenant for his future offspring.”

Notice once again the pattern. Abraham still wants God to keep His promise through the line of Ishmael. Human reliance dies hard and slow. And God, in perfect divine stubbornness, again says, “No way. You are going to have your own son, born through your own wife. And what’s more, you’re going to give him the name Isaac (which means laughter) as a constant reminder of how I do what is ridiculously impossible on mere human terms.”

- d) ***Finally, when all looked hopeless, God fulfilled His promise to Abraham and Sarah.***

IPAD TEXT - Genesis 21:1-2 - “The Lord came to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. [2] Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time God had told him.”

Abraham finally sees the lesson. The only acceptable response to God’s promise is ***trust***, not ***self-reliance***. Our efforts can never bring God’s blessing down on our terms.

Those are the bare events of the Biblical record. Now Paul ties them up in a very important analogy for the Galatian believers, and for us today.

2) **TIMELESS LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH FROM THESE EVENTS
IN THE JEWISH TORAH**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 4:24-27 - “These things are being taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai and bears children into slavery — this is Hagar. [25] Now Hagar represents Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. [26] But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. [27] For it is written, Rejoice, childless woman, unable to give birth. Burst into song and shout, you who are not in labor, for the children of the desolate woman will be many, more numerous than those of the woman who has a husband.”

- a) *These two women, Hagar and Sarah, and their two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, represent two different approaches to God.*

Hagar, the slave woman taken by Abraham to produce the son he didn't think God could produce, represents human effort expended to complete what can only be brought about by God's gracious provision. We must never forget this lesson. Right from God's initial dealings with Abraham it was His intention to eliminate self-reliant religious efforts to salvation and merit.

Paul says Hagar is the standing picture - the abiding reminder **from the Jewish Torah** - that the law can never transform the heart and bring relationship with God. Just as Ishmael was **“born as a result of the flesh”(4:23)**, so all religious lawkeeping, in the very same way, will always be **“weakened by the flesh”(Romans 8:3)**. Human pride and self-reliance dismantle any hope of mere religion saving anyone - even if (**especially** if) that religion contains a great deal of good morality and teaching. That will only make people aspire to it in their own zealous strength.

- b) ***Religion, apart from divine enablement through the Spirit, can only produce slavery and bondage.***

This was Paul’s conclusion as he traced the link between Hagar, Ishmael, Mount Sinai, through to Jerusalem. He saw a whole continuous religious thread - a system designed to keep people away from salvation through Christ and freedom in Christ. Jesus was God’s provision, the goal of the promise. Yet Paul saw a whole nation being bound in the slave-line of Hagar and Ishmael.

Look at how strongly he puts this thought in **Galatians 4:24-25** - **“These things are being taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai and bears children into slavery — this is Hagar. [25] Now Hagar represents Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for *she is in slavery with her children.*” - IPAD TEXT**

Now, think back to my remarks about how shocking Paul’s words would have been to these Jewish false teachers in Galatia. They took great pride in the fact that they had Abraham as their father. This was their badge of fame and righteousness.

Now Paul was telling them that they were descendants of Abraham all right, but not through Isaac. They were following in the line of the slave woman Hagar and the slave offspring Ishmael! Can you imagine how that would sound to Jewish ears?

But we must not lose Paul’s key point. Religious observance - ***any*** religious observance, Jewish or Gentile, ancient or modern, western or eastern - any religion that skirts around or diminishes the person and work of Jesus Christ can only produce ***bondage and slavery.***

This is the pungent point Paul was making earlier when he showed that religion, like nothing else on earth, opens up people's hearts and minds to demonic powers when Jesus Christ is left out of the picture:

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 4:8-9 - "But in the past, since you didn't know God, you were enslaved to things that by nature are not gods. [9] But now, since you know God, or rather have become known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elements? Do you want to be enslaved to them all over again?"

3) **THE HEAVENLY JERUSALEM AND THE LIFE OF FREEDOM IN CHRIST JESUS**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 4:26-31 - “But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. [27] For it is written, Rejoice, childless woman, unable to give birth. Burst into song and shout, you who are not in labor, for the children of the desolate woman will be many, more numerous than those of the woman who has a husband. [28] Now you too, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. [29] But just as then the child born as a result of the flesh persecuted the one born as a result of the Spirit, so also now. [30] But what does the Scripture say? “Drive out the slave and her son, for the son of the slave will never be a coheir with the son of the free woman.” [31] Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of a slave but of the free woman.”

Finally, Paul draws his closing contrast between the earthly Jerusalem of the Judaisers, bound up in the slavery of law religion, with the heavenly Jerusalem of which the Galatians were a part, the people of God created by faith in Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

What Paul has in mind by the “Jerusalem above” can be seen in **Colossians 3:1-3 - “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. [3] For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” - IPAD TEXT**

Paul cites the quotation from **Isaiah 54:1** - a prophet word to Jerusalem linking her with the barrenness of Sarah. Just as Sarah could produce no heir of her own, but would rely on God’s promise and provision, so God would bless those who would share her faith and reliance on God by blessing them with the fulfillment of all His good promise in Christ Jesus.

This is a very tricky passage. If it all seems a bit involved, just remember the one foundational point. Freedom can only come by relying on the work of Christ Jesus, applied in the heart by the Holy Spirit. All else will come to bondage and despair. This is Paul’s main point. As he brings his Old Testament analogy to a close, he focuses on the issue of **freedom**:

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 4:31 - “Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of a slave but of the free woman.”

The slave woman can only produce slaves. The woman of promise (Sarah) produces children of freedom. Freedom comes from the work of the Spirit in the heart, not the self-reliant, outward keeping of religious regulations.

Consider in closing the issue of freedom. John Piper illustrates this point beautifully. There are different **kinds** of freedom. Suppose I am on my way to the airport to go skydiving. But on route my car gets a flat. I can't get help quickly enough and I miss my appointment. I may have the ability to jump and the desire to jump, but I lack the **freedom of opportunity**.

Or suppose I get to the airport in time, get my parachute and tell the instructor I want to jump. He asks if I have the required training and courses on how to do it. I have none, and he refuses to let me jump. Now I have the opportunity, and the desire, but I lack the **freedom of ability**.

Finally, suppose I get to the airport on time for the appointment, I have the courses completed and passed, and off we go, up into the sky. But once in the air, I get a terrible sense of fright as I see the tiny buildings and trees below. Filled with fear and panic, I tell the pilot to bring me back down to earth. Now I have the freedom of opportunity, the freedom of ability, but not the most important freedom of all, the **freedom of desire**.

Apart from Christ, any other religious system will leave me lacking in these key areas of freedom. I am free to choose any religion I want, but only Christ Jesus can pardon sin, and only the Holy Spirit can change the desires of my heart. And what we need is exactly what we are promised in Christ Jesus and the inward work of the Holy Spirit. This is precisely the kind of real, inward, powerful freedom God's New Covenant was designed to produce in those who would, like Sarah, put their trust in God to fulfill his promise and empower His people:

IPADS TEXT - Ezekiel 36:26-27 - "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. [27] I will place my Spirit within you and cause you to follow my statutes and carefully observe my ordinances."

This is what freedom in Christ Jesus means. It isn't the freedom of *anarchy*. It's the freedom to *become*. It is the joyous freedom of, in increasing measure, having "*Christ formed in you*"(4:19). The desire for that process isn't something you can self-generate. Religion is a grueling bore apart from the Spirit of Christ in your heart. You were never designed to live on your own resources. Never settle for less than Christ living in your heart by the power of the Holy Spirit.