

Galatians

The Story of the Mistaken Mother

Galatians 4:21-31

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The Story of the Mistaken Mother

Scripture

When my children, Lauren and Jon, were little they had a book titled *Are You My Mother?* Here is how that story begins:

A mother bird sat on her egg.
The egg jumped.
“Oh, oh!” said the mother bird. “My baby will soon be here!
He will want to eat.
“I must get something for my baby bird to eat!” she said. “I
will be back!”
So away she went.
The egg jumped. It jumped, and jumped, and jumped!
Out came the baby bird!
“Where is my mother?” he said.
He looked for her.
He looked up. He did not see her.
He looked down. He did not see her.
“I will go look for her,” he said.
So away he went.
Down, out of the tree he went.
Down, down, down! It was a long way down.
The baby bird could not fly.
He could not fly, but he could walk. “Now I will go and find
my mother,” he said.
He did not know what his mother looked like. He went right
by her. He did not see her.
He came to a kitten. “Are you my mother?” he said to the
kitten.
The kitten just looked and looked. It did not say a thing.
The kitten was not his mother, so he went on.
Then he came to a hen. “Are you my mother?” he said to the
hen.
“No,” said the hen.
The kitten was not his mother.
The hen was not his mother. So the baby bird went on.

The story continues with the bird looking for his mother. He goes to different animals and vehicles and asks them if they are his mother. Finally, a bulldozer picks up the bird and puts him in his nest just as his mother arrives back. She says to him, “Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, I know who you are,” says the baby bird. “You are not a kitten. You are not a hen. You are not a dog. You are not a cow. You are not a boat, or a plane, or a snort! You are a bird, and you are my mother.”¹

The little bird in this story did not know who his mother was. We might call this story *The Story of the Mistaken Mother*.

Today’s sermon is also titled “The Story of the Mistaken Mother.” In Galatians 4:21-31 Paul shows that the Galatians were confused about who their spiritual “mother” was. Due to the teaching of the false teachers they thought that they were Works’ Children when in fact they were Grace’s Children. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Let’s see how the apostle Paul puts it in Galatians 4:21-31:

²¹ Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? 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.

²⁴ These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. 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. ²⁷ For it is written:

**“Be glad, O barren woman,
who bears no children;**

¹ P. D. Eastman, *Are You My Mother?* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1960).

**break forth and cry aloud,
you who have no labor pains;
because more are the children of the desolate woman
than of her who has a husband.”**

²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.
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. 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 in-
heritance with the free woman’s son.” ³¹ Therefore, brothers,
we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.
(Galatians 4:21-31)

Introduction

Commentator John Stott notes that many people regard our text for today—Galatians 4:21-31—as the most difficult passage in Paul’s letter to the Galatians.² There are at least two reasons why it is considered a difficult passage.

First, Galatians 4:21-31 is considered difficult because it presupposes a rather good grasp of the Old Testament, which not many people—even believers—possess. Paul makes reference to Abraham, Hagar, Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac, Mount Sinai and Jerusalem; who are these people and how do they relate to Paul’s point?

And second, this passage is considered difficult because Paul’s argument is fairly technical. It is the kind of argument that theological students love to discuss and debate.

Nevertheless, Paul’s teaching in Galatians 4:21-31 is very important and relevant to people living today. It is particularly relevant to religious people. Paul is writing this section to people “who want to be under the law,” that is, to people who want to observe a certain set of rules in order to earn God’s favor. He shows us what that means.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 121.

All religions, with only one exception, teach that salvation involves human achievement. These religions may disagree on what a person must do to be saved, but they all teach that people must somehow *earn* salvation in some way.

Christianity stands apart from all other religions, proclaiming that God alone saves. Divine favor, says Christianity, cannot be earned. It can only be received. We come before God like poverty-stricken beggars, with nothing to offer except our sin. Out of his superabundant grace, God pours his riches upon us, providing complete forgiveness and everlasting life.

The difference between salvation by works and salvation by grace is all the difference in the world. A religion of works leads to slavery and death; a religion of grace brings freedom and life. Works-oriented people cannot quite accept this truth. They think that they can lift themselves out of the spiritual poorhouse if they just work hard enough.

Lesson

Paul's teaching against salvation by works is brought to a climax here in Galatians 4:21-31. As we study this passage we notice that Paul breaks his discussion into three sections. First, Paul gives historical facts. Second, he gives spiritual truths. And third, he gives us some practical applications.

I. The Historical Facts (4:21-23)

First, notice the historical facts.

Paul gives the historical facts by first asking a question and then giving an explanation.

A. *The Question (4:21)*

Paul's question is in verse 21: **“Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?”**

As Tim Keller notes, to be “**under the law**” refers to *relying on the law* for right standing before God. If you look at Galatians 4:4-5 you will notice that Paul says that Christ redeemed those “under the law” by giving them “the full rights as sons.” Apart from Christ we have to earn our way by full and perfect obedience to every part of God’s law in order to achieve right standing with him. But Christ came, “born under law” (4:4), which means that he came and fully and perfectly obeyed every part of God’s law for us, so that now our “sonship” is not based on our law-performance but rather on Christ’s law-performance.³

Paul questions those who want to find acceptance with God on the basis of their own performance. In effect he says, “**Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?** Listen to the law! For the very law, whose slave you want to be, will judge and condemn you!”

B. The Explanation (4:22-23)

Paul then answers his own question. He refers to Abraham, Abraham’s two wives, and his two sons. Paul says in Galatians 4:22-23: “**For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. 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.**”

In order to understand what Paul is saying we need to know the history to which Paul is referring. Perhaps the easiest way to grasp the history is to trace briefly Abraham’s experiences as recorded in Genesis 12-21. Using Abraham’s age as our guide, let’s trace the events upon which Paul is basing his argument.

At 75 Abraham was called by God to Canaan. God promised Abraham many descendants (Genesis 12:1-9). Both Abraham and his wife, Sarah, wanted children, but Sarah was barren. God was waiting until both of them were (in the words of Bible commenta-

³ Tim Keller, *Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: Leader’s Guide* (Manhattan, NY: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2003), 115.

tor Warren Wiersbe) “as good as dead”⁴ before he would perform the miracle of sending them a son (cf. Romans 4:16-25).

At 85 the promised son had not yet arrived, and Sarah became impatient. She suggested to Abraham that he sleep with Hagar, her maid, and have a son by her. This act was legal in that society, but it was not in the plan and purpose of God. Abraham followed Sarah’s suggestion and slept with Hagar (Genesis 16:1-3).

At 86 Hagar got pregnant and Sarah got jealous! Clearly Abraham was not the one with the problem producing a child. Things got so difficult in the home that Sarah threw Hagar out. But the Lord intervened, sent Hagar back to Sarah, and promised to take care of her son. Hagar’s son was then born, and Abraham called him Ishmael, which means “God hears” (Genesis 16:4-16).

At 99 God spoke to Abraham and promised—again!—that he would have a son by Sarah. Abraham was to name this son Isaac, which means “laughter.” Later, God appeared again and reaffirmed the promise to Sarah as well (Genesis 17-18).

At 100 Isaac was born (Genesis 21:1-7). Abraham named the boy Isaac as God commanded. But the arrival of Isaac created a new problem in the home; Ishmael now had a rival. For 14 years Ishmael was his Father’s only son, very dear to his heart. How would Ishmael respond to the presence of a rival?

At 103 Isaac was weaned. It was customary for Jews to wean their children when they were about 3 years old and also to make a great occasion of the weaning. At the weaning feast, Ishmael started to mock Isaac (Genesis 21:8ff) and create trouble in the home. There was only solution to the problem, and a costly one at that: Hagar and her son Ishmael would have to go. With a broken heart Abraham sent his son away, because this is what the Lord told him to do (Genesis 21:9-14).

On the surface, this story appears to be nothing more than a tale of a dysfunctional family. But beneath the surface are meanings that carry tremendous spiritual power. Abraham, his two

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Free* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1987), 101.

wives, and his two sons represent spiritual realities; and their relationships teach us important lessons.

II. The Spiritual Truths (4:24-27)

Second, let's examine the spiritual truths.

Paul presents the historical facts in order to reveal spiritual truths that illustrate the inconsistency of salvation by works. So Paul says in verses 24-26: **“These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.”**

Paul's point is that Hagar and Ishmael represent the law covenant of Sinai and the earthly city of Jerusalem, which by and large represents people who are not yet Christians, and who are therefore **in slavery** (4:25). This refers to those who are “under the law” (4:21). People who are trying to earn their own salvation through their own works are described as **slaves**. So Hagar represents salvation by works.

Sarah, on the other hand, represents salvation by grace. Paul says that **“the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother”** (4:26). The heavenly Jerusalem is the city of believers.

It is important to realize that Paul is using the story of Abraham as an allegory. Tim Keller points that some people are disturbed that Hagar (who in the actual story is an innocent victim) represents something negative, while Sarah (who in the actual story is an unbelieving collaborator with Abraham) represents something positive. But we must remember that Paul himself says in verse 24, **“These things *may* be taken figuratively.”** In other words, though we must read the account as a literally true story and learn the moral and theological lessons of it, that is not what

Paul is doing here. He finds the story to be a good symbolic illustration of grace and works.⁵

The reason this is such good illustration of grace and works is because of the choices that Abraham made. Abraham had two choices before him. Tim Keller puts it well. Abraham “could wait to receive what only God was capable of doing, or he could go out and attain what he was capable of doing. Put another way, Abraham could choose to have faith in God’s promise and wait to receive the son, or Abraham could have faith in his own ability and work to attain the son.”⁶ Do you see the two choices? Abraham was exercising faith in one choice or the other. Either he would trust in God’s ability to provide, or he could trust in his own ability to attain.

Abraham initially chose to trust in his own works. The result was disastrous. Sarah became jealous of Hagar, and the family was torn apart by dissension and strife, which exists even to this day as Ishmael is the father of the Arab peoples and Isaac the father of the Jews.

Paul’s analogy is so good. The gospel is not what we can attain by our own righteousness. When we try to achieve our own righteousness, we discover that the result is disastrous. But rather, the gospel is that we receive a righteousness provided by God. God in his grace gives us what we cannot provide for ourselves. God gave Abraham the promised son Isaac when he could not provide that for himself. That is the gospel.

III. The Practical Applications (4:28-31)

Finally, let’s note some practical applications.

Paul said in verse 28 to the people in Galatia, “**Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.**” Christians, like Isaac, are children of promise. Non-Christians, like Ishmael, are children of works. Our descent as Christians from Abraham is

⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

spiritual not physical. We are born supernaturally into God's family and made everlasting heirs of heaven's imperishable riches.

Paul makes two applications.

A. *We Must Expect Persecution (4:29)*

First, we must expect persecution.

Until we get to heaven, we must expect persecution. And that persecution will come from our half-brothers—people who are religious.

Paul says in verse 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.”**

Why should Christians expect persecution? Because the gospel is threatening to religious people. Irreligious people don't care much about God and how to get into a right relationship with God. But religious people have developed ideas, which consist mainly of rules and regulations, about how to get into right standing with God. But the gospel insists that our best deeds are useless before God. They are never sufficient to save us. And so John Stott says,

The persecution of the true church, of Christian believers who trace their spiritual descent from Abraham, is not always by the world, who are strangers unrelated to us, but by our half-brothers, religious people, the nominal church. It has always been so. The Lord Jesus was bitterly opposed, rejected, mocked and condemned by his own nation. The fiercest opponents of the apostle Paul, who dogged his footsteps and stirred up strife against him, were the official church, the Jews. The monolithic structure of the medieval papacy persecuted all Protestant minorities with ruthless, unremitting ferocity. And the greatest enemies of the evangelical faith today are not unbelievers, who when they hear the gospel often embrace it, but the church, the establishment, the hierarchy. Isaac is always mocked and persecuted by Ishmael.⁷

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 124.

B. *We Must Get Rid of Works (4:30-31)*

And second, we must get rid of works.

Paul says in verses 30-31, **“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.’ Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.”**

The second application is that we must get rid of works. Hagar and her son Ishmael symbolize works, whereas Sarah and her son Isaac symbolize grace.

Hagar and Ishmael symbolize our attempt to do what only God can do. This self-righteous approach cannot co-exist alongside grace. Therefore, just as Hagar and Ishmael were cast out of Abraham’s household (Genesis 21:10, 12), so must we cast out all of our works-righteous attempts to please and satisfy God.

Conclusion

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’”⁸ The former are people of faith and have Sarah as their spiritual mother; the latter are people of works and have Hagar as their spiritual mother.

So, like the little bird in the book titled *Are You My Mother?*, you also need to ask who your spiritual mother is. Is your mother Sarah? Or is your mother Hagar?

If Sarah is your mother, you have a faith based on grace. But, if Hagar is your mother, then you have a faith based on works.

Let me encourage you to examine your faith, and base your faith on grace and not on works. Amen.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1946), 72.

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develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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