

## Living as Children of Promise

### Gal. 4:21-31

I've noticed over the years that one of the things that gets me into trouble when I'm in an argument is this overwhelming sense that I need to have the last word. I don't even need to know what I'm going to say, so it's not even contingent on how powerful my closing argument is. It just seems like the last voice that needs to be heard should, naturally, be mine. Somehow it just feels right. Usually with regrettable results!

I recently came across an e-card reminder that gave this advice, "*Remember, women always have the last word in an argument. Anything a man adds after that is the beginning of a new argument.*" I can't argue with that.

The truth is, getting the last word in an argument is usually a function of pride – I know it is with me. But what holds true in interpersonal squabbles doesn't hold true when you're arguing against heretical teaching that's infecting the lives of people that you love. The verses that we are looking at this morning are Paul's "last word" in his argument from the OT against the legalistic teaching that is threatening to infect the community of believers in Galatia. The Galatian churches were planted by Paul and had started out strong in the faith, but after Paul left the region a group of false teachers called Judaizers had infiltrated the Galatian churches with the message that trusting in Jesus wasn't enough to save them, they needed to obey the law and get circumcised if they were to be right with God. Their message was Jesus *plus* obedience to the law = salvation. It is vintage legalism – if we are to be accepted by God, it will be because we earn it by our own efforts.

In vv. 21-31 Paul levels one more argument from the OT against the Judaizers. Let's read **Gal. 4:21-31 (pray)**

Paul once again reaches back to the life of Abraham, but this time he focuses on the two sons that Abraham had by two different women and in this real story from real lives, he sees an allegorical truth that mirrors the vital difference between those who trust in Jesus only to be saved, and those who try to add in their own effort at keeping the law to be saved. Let's take a minute to look at the OT story that Paul is referring to.

### The Promise made to Abram and Sarai

When Abraham was 75 and still called Abram God first appeared to him and promised him that He would make a great nation out of his offspring and that He would bless the nations through his offspring. It's a great promise, but the problem is that Abram and his wife Sarai, who was 65, had no offspring and the biological clock was ticking. Nevertheless, Abram believed that God was able to do what He promised. So, based on God's promise, they begin to anticipate the arrival of a son. And the years go by. One year, two years, three years...still no son. Ten long

years later, their faith in God's promise has begun to wane and one day Sarai came to Abram with a plan: there's a way that we can take matters into our own hands and help fulfill God's promise. Sarah had a slave girl named Hagar that was given to her when she was in Egypt and by the conventions of the day, if Hagar were to conceive by Abraham, her child would legally be considered Sarai's child. Abram listens to his wife, and because his faith is probably stretched pretty thin too, he decides that helping God out may not be such a bad idea and he goes in to Hagar and she conceives and Ishmael is born. For a short time it seems like Sarai's plan is working beautifully, but it sours quickly. Ishmael isn't Sarai's son, and Hagar begins to openly scorn Sarai. Rather than filling the emptiness that Sarai felt so deeply, Ishmael became a daily reminder of that emptiness.

And the years go slowly by. Another five years, ten years, finally fourteen years later – Abram is now 99 years old and Sarai is 90 years old and, folks, they have given up all hope in ever having a son. But God appears to Abram once again, once again promises that He is going to make a great nation out of Abraham and that He will make an everlasting covenant with his offspring and just to underline that promise, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, which means *father of a multitude*. We know that their faith, though still strongly in the Lord, in regards to God's promise of their bearing a son has long evaporated because they both laugh when God renews His promise that they will yet bear a son. But soon they are laughing for a different reason as God does a miracle and Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac.

## **Two responses to God's promises**

Paul's argument is very simple: these two boys, born under very different circumstances, represent two very different responses to God's promises. Ishmael represents trying to bring about God's promises through our own strength by taking matters into our own hands. Isaac represents trusting God to fulfill His promises by His power in His time. Ishmael represents what man can do. Isaac represents what only God can do.

Paul is asking the Galatian believers, *which line do you want to belong to? The line of Ishmael – the line of trying to earn God's acceptance by our own efforts at keeping the law? Or the line of Isaac – the line that trusts God to keep His promise and save us through the work of Christ alone?*

Ishmael becomes a symbol of what man can do in our own strength, in this case keeping the law – the covenant given at Mt. Sinai. Just as Ishmael was born to a slave woman, our flesh can only lead us to slavery, never freedom. That's what the legalists are offering you, Galatians. Slavery. But the gospel of Christ alone – that is the line of Isaac. Trusting God to do for us what we can never do, what's impossible for us to do – trusting God to save us through faith in Christ. That, Galatians, will lead to freedom – freedom from the bondage of trying to keep the law in your own strength, freedom from being condemned, freedom from sin, freedom from God's judgment. Which line do you want to belong to?

Here's the direction I want to take in the final minutes of this message. We've spent a lot of time contrasting legalism with believing the promises of God, and last week looked at some characteristics of legalism. I want to take this message in a little different direction and talk about what it means for those of us who have trusted in Jesus as our Savior to live as children of promise. I'm basing this on verse 28: *Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.* Although Paul is agonizing over the legalism that is gaining a grip on the Galatians, we see in verse 28 that he is also confident that they really did come to Christ in genuine faith, and that they are of the line of Isaac, not Ishmael. He is confident that they are, like Isaac, children of promise. Here he's calling them – and through this letter, us - to live like children of promise.

*1. As children of promise we are to rely on God to fulfill His promises rather than try to fulfill them in our own strength*

The first and most important way we rely on God to fulfill His promises rather than try to fulfill them in our own strength is by trusting in Jesus Christ and his work on the cross to save us. The other night our family went to see the movie *Son of God* – I would recommend it – but there was a moment in the movie that I've never seen in any other movie depicting Jesus' life. After being beaten and whipped, Jesus was taken out to the street where the crowds were lined up on both sides, and he was told to carry his cross which was lying on the street and then one of the soldiers pushed him down next to the cross. Jesus is weak and barely able to get up, but as he pulls himself up by the cross, he leans towards it and *kisses the cross*. It hit me because just before he did that I found myself wondering how Jesus viewed (and still views) that old rugged piece of wood that he was nailed to. Whether he actually ever kissed the cross or not, we know that Jesus embraced the cross as the will of His Father and the only way to save the lost sinners he loves so much. He embraced the excruciating agony and shame of the cross out of love for you and me.

We don't play a part in that, folks. We can't add anything to that. When it comes to adding to Jesus' redemptive work, we really are like the thief who was crucified next to Jesus. It was obvious he couldn't offer Jesus anything to deserve eternal life. All he could do was believe in Jesus and ask the Lord to remember him in mercy. When it comes to adding to Jesus' saving work on the cross, I have nothing more to offer him than the thief on the cross. You have nothing more. Just a plea for mercy and a faith in his gracious promise. And as the thief hung helplessly on that cross, he heard this promise from Jesus, *I tell you truly; today you shall be with me in paradise*. That is a strong promise: *I tell you truly...* and in that moment the thief became a child of promise. And when we come in simple faith and trust in Jesus, we come with nothing more to offer, but our need for mercy, and the Bible tells us that He promises us eternal life. When it comes to our salvation we are children of promise but it doesn't stop with our salvation: we are children of promise when it comes to every other area of our lives.

What is your need this morning?

- Is there some sin that's defeating you again and again?
- Is there some need that's pressing the walls around you making you feel anything but free?
- Is there some fear that grips your heart and won't let go?
- A couple of weeks ago we talked about our identity as children of God – do you struggle believing that? Do you feel you have an identity that's been etched so deeply into your psyche that you'll never be free from it?

There is a promise in God's word for any need in our lives, a key that can set us free from bondage to serve God with all our hearts. We are like Christian and Hopeful in Bunyon's Pilgrims Progress when they were imprisoned for several days in Giant Despair's dungeon. Suddenly Christian remembered something that he had in his pocket.

*"What a fool" he said, "am I, thus to lie in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty? I have a key in my bosom, called Promise, that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle." Using the key, Christian and Hopeful escape the dungeon and find freedom.*

You have a key in your pocket called promise – the great and precious promises of God found in His word, but needing to be carried in our hearts. Find the promise you need and hold onto it, memorize it, claim it, put it in your pocket and use it as a key to free you from whatever your need is. As children of promise we are to rely on God's promises – not our own strength.

## *2. As children of promise, we need to learn to thrive in the desert of waiting*

As a pastor, one of the dynamics I see at play in so many people's lives at different points is the tension between trusting God's promise and waiting for that promise to be fulfilled. Every week dearly loved children of promise assemble here, many with needs that seem to go unmet for a length of time.

- A financial need that doesn't get met
- A needed job that doesn't open up
- An illness that doesn't get better week after week, month after month
- A fear that doesn't seem to lift, a marriage that doesn't seem to improve, a straying child who doesn't seem to be reachable by God

And you lift up prayers to God again and again. And you come to church and some weeks God encourages your heart through the worship or the message and you find strength but then the next week and the next week and the next week, it's still there. And in that season of waiting your heart (and my heart) can be tempted to think, *is this even real? Is God even hearing me,*

*will He ever answer my prayers? If God is faithful to keep His promises, why isn't my answer coming?*

When these internal tensions hit us it helps to remember the nature of a promise. A promise is always future oriented until it is fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah had to wait for 25 long years before the promise was fulfilled. Stop and think about that for a moment. We know the end of the story for them but for 25 agonizing years the promise that they longed for most was unfulfilled. Sarah knows what it is to have her faith fail, to try to give birth to God's promise by man's effort – and then to live 14 long painful years with yet another reminder of her wound.

The fact is God's promise to Abraham and Sarah wasn't fulfilled...until it was. Living as children of promise necessarily calls us into a desert called *waiting*, because promises are future oriented. But God doesn't call us into the desert of waiting just to teach us to survive. It's not a "man against wild" survivor training. It might seem impossible but God wants to teach us how to thrive in that place, a place where all our crutches that help us to stand and nic nacs that clutter our lives are stripped away and we're left with nothing but God's promises. A desert where there's no food or drink in sight, but we find food and drink in God's promises and our souls thrive.

So if that's you this morning. You dragged yourself to church but honestly you sometimes wonder what's the use. The promise you claimed for your soul last week or last month or last year hasn't been fulfilled yet and after a while it seems untrue. Remember God's promises aren't fulfilled until they are. Some may not be fulfilled this side of eternity – Abraham knew some of those promises too – but they will be fulfilled. So I'm not encouraging you to hang on. Not encouraging you to survive. Encouraging you to embrace the promises of God in the desert of waiting and *thrive!* That brings us to a third point about living as children of promise.

### *3. Remember that God's promises flip the script on weakness and strength*

Listen to verse 27: *Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.*

These verses describe a desolate older woman in those days – no husband, no children. She would have had no way to support herself, she would have been an outcast, she would have been in shame. But God flips the script and she is the one who should rejoice – she *will* have (future promise) more children than the one who's all set up with a husband. It's a promise. A to-be-fulfilled-at-some-point-in-the-future promise.

This flip the script on weakness and strength thing is a strong theme in the Bible. The strong in this world need to humble (weaken) themselves or they will be devastated on that final day. And the weak and humbled in this life will in the end find reason to rejoice forever and eternity. Momentary pain will lead to eternal gain.

God also flips the script on the trials and challenges in our lives. What seems like a blessing – like having everything we want and everything going smoothly in our lives – may not be such a blessing if we grow spiritually dull and complacent. And that trial, that hardship, that obstacle, is so difficult and we wish it were gone, but silently, slowly, if we hold onto God’s promises and let Him do His work in us, we grow stronger. We grow spiritually sharp. We learn compassion for others who are suffering. Our treasure gets reinvested in eternity and that relocates our hearts to eternity too.

Recently I made a new friend at the Y and honestly when I first saw him there working out I’m thinking, I’d like to learn from this guy cause he looks like he’s in great shape. Last week I learned that he was born with cystic fibrosis and wasn’t supposed to live past the age of 15. I don’t know how old he is but I’d guess he’s at least in his 30’s and is married with children. He’s had to live with his illness – his weakness – all his life. But rather than let it paralyze him, he’s let it inspire him to work out hard and take good care of his body so that he can be in very good shape. Even cystic fibrosis can be a curse that brings a blessing – a weakness that God flips the script on and turns into a strength.

Living as children of promise doesn’t mean we’re passive. Relying on God’s promise doesn’t mean we do nothing. Abraham and Sarah lived life. They continued to try to have a child all those years – even when it was impossible. The problem wasn’t that they kept trying to have a son – the problem was that they stepped out of the clear boundaries that God had set in order to bring about God’s promises in their own strength.

Relying on God’s promise doesn’t check us out of life – it guides us in active, faith-filled life. If you need a job, relying on God doesn’t mean sitting at home waiting for God to move someone to call you – it means sending out resumes, pounding the pavement, doing interviews. But it does mean doing all this while relying on God to bless your efforts in His time, by His power. It means that you don’t do something dumb just to “do something” – you don’t want to give birth to an Ishmael. And believing that God will flip the script and this lean time, this hard time, this unfulfilled promise time will, in the end, be a time you look back on and thank God for. Your weakness will be turned into strength. And finally and very quickly:

*4. Remember there will always be conflict between children of promise and children of flesh*

Paul reminds the Galatians that just as Ishmael scorned and mocked Isaac, the children of flesh will always be in conflict with the children of promise, the flesh will always war with the Spirit. We’ll have to leave that right there but we’ll pick it up again later in chapter five. Let’s pray.