



Children of Promise

Galatians 4:21-31

March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Big idea: Like Isaac, Christians are children of promise not slaves under the law.

Intro –

In 1660 thousands of pastors in England became criminals when a new law forbade religious gatherings that were did not follow the forms of the Church of England. They were collectively called “Nonconformists” and typically followed simple patterns of worship that you would recognize here – Bible reading, baptism of believers rather than infants, mutual accountability, and personal holiness.

You have to understand this as part of bigger changes in English life. In 1611 with the publishing of the King James Version of the Bible, the Word of God was read and spread throughout the country. In 1625, Charles I became king. Parliament attempted to limit the powers of the king, so the king dismissed the Parliament. When he recalled them a decade later, they decided to raise an army against him. Allied with the army of Parliament were many of the nonconformist Christians who saw the Church of England as connected to the King of England. A civil war erupted from 1642-1648. King Charles lost the war and then lost his head. Oliver Cromwell assumed power for a decade that was a period of peace and freedom for the nonconformists.

It was during those years of freedom for nonconformists that a simple country repairman named John Bunyan came to faith in Christ through the influence of his wife and a doctor/Baptist pastor in his community. In the following years he dug into scripture and what few books he had, including one of his favorites, Martin Luther’s commentary on Galatians. But the political tide turned against the Parliamentarians and therefore the nonconformists. When Cromwell died, Charles II (the son of Charles I) took the throne and reestablished the Church of England as the only legal and accepted form of worship. The nonconformists were forbidden to preach under penalty of jail. One of those jailed was John Bunyan. He was given a 3-month sentence that turned into 12 years. He vowed that he would not stop preaching and they could keep him in jail until moss grew on his eyelids.

It was while Bunyan was in prison that he began writing a story that could be understood by the uneducated people he lived among and served. He wanted it to be a book that could explain life as a Christian trying to live for God in the world. He chose to write an allegory, using a compelling simple story with a greater meaning.

He didn’t intent to bury the meaning under subtle layers. He kept the meaning of the allegory clear.

The main character is “Christian.” He represents Christians.

Christian hears the gospel from Evangelist, who represents evangelists.

A neighbor of Christian refuses to follow Christ. His name is Obstinate.

Along the way on his journey to the Celestial City, Christian meets other characters. Their names include Hypocrisy, Formalist, Worldly Wiseman, and the Giant Despair who lives in Doubting Castle.

Christians have been reading this book, now translated into over 200 languages, for 350 years because it is such a clear and helpful picture of the ordinary Christian life told through allegory.

Paul uses an allegory in this section that ends Galatians 4. The meaning isn’t quite as “on the surface” as *Pilgrim’s Progress*, but with a little digging I think you’ll see the point.

Unlike *Pilgrim’s Progress*, this allegory is based on a historical event. It starts by explaining the historical event, using that historical event as an allegory, and then making the allegory personal.

The passage targets the people described in v. 21 that have been the target of the entire book – you who want to be under the law. They are the same people he has described in the following ways –

**Galatians 1:6-7** I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; <sup>7</sup> which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Some are leaving the true gospel for “another gospel”

**Galatians 3:3** Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

This other gospel tells them they might begin by the Spirit – i.e. the Spirit gives them new life as they receive forgiveness by faith – but they have to be perfected by their own efforts. Specifically, they have to keep the OT laws of circumcision, diet, and special days.

**Galatians 3:26** For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

**Galatians 4:7** Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

**Galatians 4:9a** But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again...

They are tempted to turn back, to live “under the law,” to rely on the law to get them to God or at least to get them closer to God.

Now, in one more attempt to persuade them to not go back to relying on the law but to stick to faith in Christ as sufficient to save, he uses an allegory.

1. **Historical**: Two sons of Abraham (4:21-23)
  - a. Once more Galatians returns to the story of Abraham. We already spent significant time considering what we learn from Abraham’s faith in Galatians 3.
  - b. Abraham had more than two sons, but there are two key sons.
    - i. One by the bondwoman
    - ii. One by the free woman.
  - c. God promised Abraham as many descendants as there are stars he can see in the sky. (Gen. 15)
    - i. It’s hard to have many descendants when you haven’t had any descendants. He and his wife, Sarah, were childless and already in their senior years.
    - ii. 10 more years went by with no child, so they took matters into their own hands. Sarah came up with the idea of Abraham conceiving a child through Sarah’s servant, Hagar. Hagar is the “bondwoman” from Gal. 4:22 and Sarah is the “free woman.” Abraham laid with her and she conceived a child, Ishmael.
  - d. The son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh (v. 23a)
    - i. Ishmael was born through the normal, human means without God’s intervention.
    - ii. Wilson - The term “flesh” refers to what is merely human rather than divine, with all the weaknesses both physical and moral that go with the human condition.
    - iii. Timothy George puts it this way, “The birth of Ishmael was the result of the outworking of the philosophy that God helps those who help themselves. ... Ishmael was Abraham’s son by proxy, according to the flesh; Isaac was his son by promise, a living witness to divine grace.”
  - e. The son by the free woman through the promise (v. 23b)
    - i. More than 10 years after the birth of Ishmael, God fulfilled His promise to Abraham and Sarah. Isaac was born to Sarah.
    - ii. He was through promise in that he was a fulfillment of the promise to provide an heir and then uncountable descendants through that heir.

iii. The promise then descended from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob...and on down the line until Jesus.

2. ***Allegorical***: Two sons represent two approaches to God (4:24-27)

a. Now Paul will use this as an allegory.

- i. The Greek word is *allegoria*, meaning allegory is itself a Greek word. It's a compound word formed by combining the words for "other" and "to speak." So it means to speak other than the literal meaning. You could also say it is to speak figuratively (NIV) or as an illustration (CSB).
- ii. We don't take an allegorical approach to everything in scripture. We know this is unique because he spells it out as allegorical. In different times of church history people have tried to take an allegorical approach to many parts of scripture in a way that takes away the plain meaning to find a deeper meaning.
- iii. So for example, Numbers 19 describes the sacrifice of a red heifer. The blood was to be sprinkled and then heifer was to be burned and the ashes disposed of. The allegorical interpretation in the early church said the heifer was Jesus (plausible) and the ones taking the ashes and disposing of them were those who preached the goodness of the gospel, specifically the apostles (a stretch).
- iv. The problem with allegory is you can make a passage say whatever you want.
- v. That method of interpretation was fairly common until the protestant reformation beginning in the 1500's. There was a renewed interest in the original languages of the Bible. Scholars began to focus on what they actually said and meant. In many ways it was an embrace of a literal, grammatical interpretation of scripture that launched the reformation.

b. Four sets of twos

- i. Two mothers
- ii. Two sons
- iii. Two covenants
- iv. And two cities (the present Jerusalem and the heavenly one)

c. The women are two covenants

- i. One proceeding from Mount Sinai – slaves - Hagar – the present Jerusalem (vv. 24-25)
- ii. The other is free – Sarah – the Jerusalem above (vv. 26-27)

d. Side by side

- |                                 |                             |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| i. HAGAR                        | SARAH                       |
| ii. Ishmael, son of slavery     | Isaac, son of freedom       |
| iii. Birth "according to flesh" | birth "through the promise" |
| iv. Old Covenant                | New Covenant                |
| v. Present Jerusalem            | Heavenly Jerusalem          |

e. This would have been a shocking reversal, especially if the contrast is ended with Old v New Covenant and who is truly free now.

- i. They would have expected it to go like this – Sarah → Isaac, son of freedom/promise → the Jewish people and others who are added in.
  1. Even those who are troubling the Galatians with a Jesus+ gospel would see it that way.
- ii. On the other hand, they would expect Hagar → Ishmael → the gentiles without the law!

- iii. But it's actually those who are trusting in Christ who are the heirs of Abraham through Sarah and Isaac because they are heirs of the promise.
  - iv. We would have expected the covenant from Sinai to be associated with Sarah as it was to the people descended from her that the law of Moses was given, but it was instead associated with Hagar in this allegory.
- f. The quote in v. 27 is from Isaiah 54:1
- i. It looks back to another time in Israel's history. The people had been taken away from their precious city as exiles into Babylon. They are poetically described as like a barren woman in sackcloth and ashes with no husband and no children, and yet the Lord tells her she will rejoice for she will have many sons.
  - ii. God promises His people that they will be more numerous after their return than before. It was fulfilled in a partial sense with the restoration to the land and then in a fuller sense with the church made up of Jews and Gentiles alike.
3. **Personal**: We are children of promise (4:28-31)
- a. You brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.
    - i. It's not family line that makes us children of Abraham and recipients of the promise, it's faith in Jesus. That's true of all who place their trust in Jesus, Jew and Gentile alike.
    - ii. We are children of the free woman (v. 31)
      - 1. Children of promise not children of slavery
      - 2. **Romans 4:16** For this reason *it is* by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,
      - 3. **2 Corinthians 6:18-7:1** "And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me," Says the Lord Almighty. Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.
  - b. What is our relationship to the law? One author puts it this way in describing the difference between obeying God's law and relying on God's law to save us.
    - i. Law-obeying, law-relying
      - 1. Smug, self-righteous, blind to our own sin, look down on others,
      - 2. Because we know the reality is that all have sinned (Rom. 3:23), this becomes a selective righteousness where the external, easy to see things are clean, but it hides a heart with problems.
      - 3. **Matthew 23:23-24**<sup>23</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others."<sup>24</sup> "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"
    - ii. Law-disobeying, law-relying
      - 1. Like the first category, this person thinks living a good, holy, obedient life will save them – make them right with God. However, unlike the first category, this person realizes clearly that they are falling short. They have no illusions that they are righteous on their own.

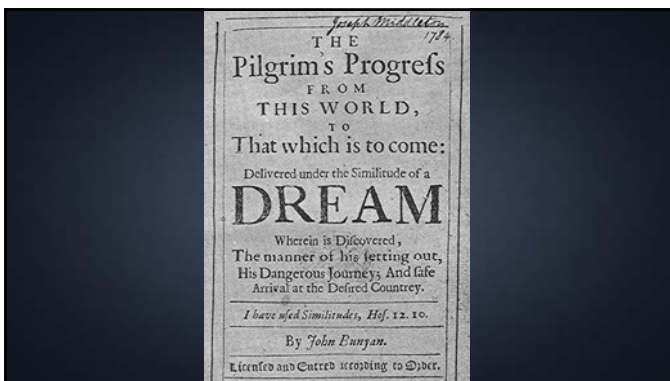
2. Guilty, ashamed, strong sense of the need for works-righteousness but unable to carry it out so always feel like they are missing the mark.
- iii. Law-disobeying, not law-relying
    1. Happier than the other two groups, less judgmental than the first group, unless we consider the judgmentalism against others who make judgments, however with the supposed moral freedom of this group comes a vague and remaining sense that God is real and I fall short of what He wants from me.
  - iv. Law-obeying, not law-relying
    1. Freed from the ceremonial aspects of the law, like circumcision (see 5:1-2). Free from relying on even the moral law to save us. It was a tutor to show us our need. It was a mirror. But I can't rely on my own flawed obedience to get me to God.
    2. However, I'm now set free to love God and others in a way that will end up obeying anyways! Not to save me, but because I'm saved.
    3. It's the point made by Eph. 2:10 after the classic statement of salvation by grace through faith in v. 8.
    4. **Ephesians 2:8-10** For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.
    5. **Galatians 5:13-14** For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."
- c. How are present Christians like Isaac?
    - i. Born (again) through divine power
    - ii. Heirs of the promise to Abraham to bless all the nations through Him, to be received by faith in the same way Abraham responded in faith
    - iii. Separate from the law, not under the law
    - iv. Persecuted
      1. After Isaac was born, the older Ishmael is described as mocking him (v. 9). Later, through Israel's history there would be ongoing conflict between the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac, in a way that actually continues today with the Arab and Jewish people in the Middle East.
      2. So now also, Paul writes, persecution comes against those who want to follow Christ today. He probably had in mind those who were coming to the Galatians with "another gospel" and stirring up trouble in their midst.
      3. That's why he would quote and apply in a different way than originally used the statement about casting out the bondwoman. Originally, Sarah said this about Hagar. Continuing the figurative language, Paul intends it as a statement about removing false teachers who confuse law and gospel.



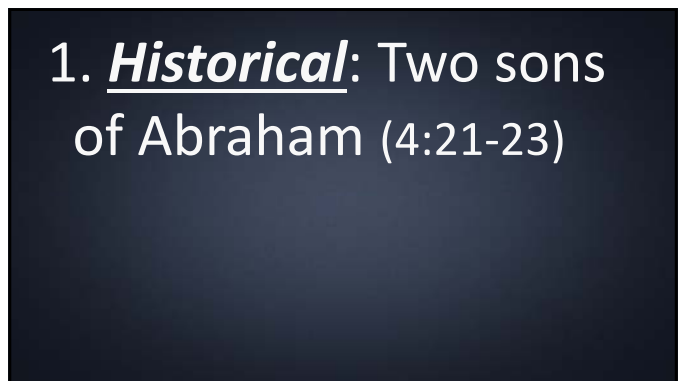
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2. **Allegorical**: Two sons represent two approaches to God (4:24-27)

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HAGAR

Ishmael (slavery)

“according to flesh”

Old Covenant

Present Jerusalem

SARAH

Isaac (freedom)

“through the promise”

New Covenant

Heavenly Jerusalem

6

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7

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Law-obeying, law-relying  
 Law-**dis**obeying, law-relying  
 Law-**dis**obeying, **not** law-relying  
 Law-obeying, **not** law-relying

10

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