*In the film “The Shawshank Redemption,” Red (played by Morgan Freeman) has spent the prime of his life wasting away in prison because of a reckless act of violence he committed as a teenager. After 40 years of incarceration, Red finally receives his release to enjoy the freedom for which he's longed for.*

*However, with his new found freedom, Red can't free himself from the habit of asking for permission each time he wishes to use the men's room. He's become "institutionalized." This new found life scares him, because he's grown accustomed to the rigid structure behind bars. Imprisonment had become safe and comfortable for Red. He didn't have to exercise his own decision-making. Someone else did the thinking for him, and now, on the outside, he faces a prospect more daunting and terrifying than incarceration – freedom.*

*Red confesses that he contemplates various ways to break his parole and return to the security of his prison cell, and he sums up his dilemma in one line: "It is a terrible thing to live in fear."*

Red had a difficult time accepting his freedom and the Galatians were on the verge of losing theirs. Due to the false teaching of the Judaizers, they sought to be institutionalized with legalism, even though they had been set free in Christ.

This morning we are in **Galatians 4:21-31**, where Paul makes another argument about the condition of the Galatians and the Judaizers by looking at some Old Testament historical figures – that being Abraham, his two sons, and his two wives. So, let’s read through our passage in its entirety before we parcel it out in sections.

**21Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? 22For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. 23But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. 24This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. 25Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. 27For it is written, “Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more numerous are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband.” 28And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. 30But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman.” 31So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.**

Okay, let’s be honest – that’s headscratcher, isn’t it? If you are confused, you are in good company. It took me a while to wrap my head around this passage, but after some study, this might be one of the strongest points against legalism that Paul has made in his letter to the Galatians. On the surface, this illustration appears to be an episode of *Sister Wives*, but beneath the surface, these Old Testament characters represent something much deeper.

Now, I am not sure why Paul goes here, especially after his heart felt-plea we looked at last week, but under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul must have had a good reason to do so. Maybe the Judaizers claimed that Paul was not following Scripture, so that’s exactly where he is going to take them. It’s also possible that the Judaizers had boasted to the Galatians that they were “a holy seed” because they were children of Abraham, and as far as they were concerned, if you were a descendant of Abraham, then you were in good standing with God. If you recall, the Jews often boasted of this very thing to John the Baptist and to Jesus. They would say things like, “***we have Abraham for our father,****”* – and of course, Paul would have to admit that Abraham was, in fact, their father, but as we will see in our passage this morning, there’s another parent to consider as well.

So, let’s take this piece by piece beginning with **verses 21-23**.

**21Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? 22For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. 23But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.**

Paul begins by asking the question, if you want to be under the law, do you really know what you are getting into? Are you really listening to what it says? If you remember, Paul is addressing the false teaching of the Judaizers who insist a right relationship with God requires Jesus + something else. According to them, Jesus is not enough, Jesus did not do enough, and the rules and the regulations and the rituals of the Law must be added to the finished work of Christ to earn God’s complete acceptance and approval and favor.

Unfortunately, the Galatians fell for this twisted version of the gospel from the Judaizers, so in light of this, Paul decided it was time for another Bible study, and he gives them a history lesson, using Abraham and his family to help them understand where they were really headed.

Everybody knew of Abraham.  He was the one from whom God brought forth an entire nation, and I am going to use his story to set the stage for this passage because I hope it will be helpful for us to see the bigger picture first.

When Abraham was 75, he was called by God to go to Canaan; and God promised him many descendants, and if you recall, both Abraham and his wife Sarah wanted children, but she was barren.

Well, 10 years go by and still no promised son. Things didn’t happen the way they wanted – God didn’t meet their expectations – so Sarah becomes impatient and comes up with an ingenuous plan to take matters into their own hands. Sarah goes to Abraham and says, *“Take my Egyptian slave Hagar, then we can have a son by her.”*  In essence she was saying, *“God made a promise to us, but it’s up to us to make it happen.”* We might say, “*God helps those who help themselves*” – which is not biblical at all – and that might surprise some of you. Anyway, Abraham followed Sarah’s plan and he married the slave Hagar.

And you know the rest of the story, Hagar gets pregnant and Sarah gets jealous, and the tension between these sister wives gets so bad that Hagar flees. But the Lord intervenes, sends Hagar back, and promises to take care of her and her unborn son. When Abraham is 86, Hagar gives birth to Ishmael.

Later at the ripe old age of 99, God speaks to Abraham and once again promises that he will have a son by Sarah and tells him to name the son Isaac.

When Abraham is 100 and Sarah is 90, when they were as good as dead in terms of child production, God does a miracle and the promised son – Isaac, is born. But the arrival of Isaac creates a new problem in the home: Ishmael now has a rival.

After three years, it was customary for the Jews to wean their children and to throw a party. Well, at the party, Ishmael starts to mock Isaac, which seems to have been the straw that broke the camel’s back, and there is only one solution – the slave Hagar and her son Ishmael have to go, and they are sent away.

So, that’s the story in a nutshell, and hopefully it will serve as a good reference as we start to narrow our focus. Paul reminded his readers that Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac – actually he had more later, but they were not important to this illustration.

Paul says that Ishmael **was born according to the flesh** – meaning Ishmael was the product of people taking matters into their own hands instead of trusting God’s promise and His provision. Ishmael does not represent faith – instead he represents self-effort and self-reliance which is at the very core of religious legalism.

Isaac, on the other hand, was born supernaturally by God because his mother Sarah could not have children. She was 90 years old, barren, and unless God graciously did the work and intervened on her behalf, it would have been impossible for her to produce life. But God was faithful and true to His promise – and in His timing, Isaac was born. God graciously did something for Sarah that she could not do for herself. Isaac was the child of promise, conceived by faith, born to a free woman.

Do you see the difference illustrated by Paul with these two sons? Ishmael represents religious legalism; whereas, Isaac represents the way of faith, where God graciously does what we cannot do for ourselves.

Now Paul wasn’t finished with the family comparisons and he moves from the two sons to the two wives, and this is where it gets a little more complicated, and hopefully, I won’t make this harder than it has to be.

**24 This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. 25Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.**

In this passage, Paul tells us that the two wives of Abraham represent two different covenants. In the Bible, a covenant is an agreement that sets forth certain promises and obligations between parties. In this passage, the two covenants in question are the Mosaic Covenant – the Law of Moses, and the Abrahamic Covenant – a covenant between God and Abraham based on faith. We previously talked about these covenants in Chapter 3, but here’s an easy way to distinguish between the two:

In the Mosaic Covenant, God essentially says: *you shall; you shall; you shall or else.* This covenant is conditional, and it hinges on the perfect obedience of man.

In contrast, in the Abrahamic Covenant, God essentially says: *I will; I will; I will, just believe*. This covenant is unconditional, and it hinges on the faithfulness of God, not on man.

Now according to Paul, and again this is just an illustration, the slave Hagar represents the covenant which came from Mount Sinai, and Mount Sinai is the place where Moses received the Mosaic Covenant – the Law. Hagar represents the Law, which produces nothing but slaves. Why? Because seeking acceptance and approval by God under the Law – which demandsperfect obedience, puts people on a perpetual treadmill of bondage. You can never earn your way out from under it. You are held in its death grip. Seeking to be made right with God by keeping the Law is impossible because that was not its intended purpose. If you recall, the Law’s purpose was to reveal our dreadful sinful condition and our desperate need for forgiveness – then it points us to Jesus. That’s its purpose. It was not designed to make us right in the eyes of God – in fact, just the opposite.

Paul continues and tells us that Hagar, not only represents the Law from Mount Sinai, but she also represents the city of Jerusalem, the Jewish capital, which is the very center of a religion of rules and regulations and rituals, where people are slaves to the Law. But Sarah represents something different. Sarah represents the Abrahamic Covenant – a covenant based on God’s gracious promises and faith, and every believer under this covenant is a miracle just like Isaac. The miracle of salvation in Christ cannot be accomplished through self-effort. It can only be done as a gracious work of God through Jesus Christ.

We are also told that Sarah represents the **Jerusalem above**, which is also called the New Jerusalem in **Revelation 21**. It is our future home, but I think Paul’s mention of the Jerusalem above speaks not so much of a place to live, but a new way to live – by grace through faith in a relationship with God. Jesus was praying to the Father in **John 17** and in **verse 3** He said, ***“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”*** Yes, eternal life involves a real heavenly place, but more so, a Person – a relationship with God – and that makes all the difference in this world and in the world to come.

The Judaizers, who were Jews, prided themselves on being the sons of Abraham. And what Paul was saying was this, *“Yes, your father is Abraham, but spiritually speaking, your mother is not Sarah, it’s Hagar.” “You’re the children of the slave Hagar – she is your mother because you are still in bondage to the Law. You are not free. You are like Ishmael, Hagar’s son, who represents self-effort and self-reliance, which is man’s way – not God’s way.*

**27For it is written, “Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more numerous are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband.”**

Here Paul quotes from **Isaiah 54:1** to contrast the futures of these two women – the barren woman represents Sarah, who had no child until later in life. The woman with a husband is Hagar, and the point Paul seems to make is that Sarah through Isaac would later become the mother of more children than Hagar. Applied spiritually, it means the gospel of grace – Christianity, would surpass Judaism – a religion of self-effort and self-reliance. God was moving, the gospel of grace was growing, and the Galatians needed to get on board.

**28And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. 30But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman.” 31So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.**

With these last few verses, Paul gives some very clear direction: **Cast out the bondwoman and her son**. Sarah and Hagar could not live in the same house. Isaac and Ishmael could not live in the same house. It did not work in Abraham’s family, and neither will it work in our lives. Law and grace cannot live in the same house. A religion based on self-effort and self-reliance is incompatible with a relationship based on grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now remember, according to Paul, the Law had a necessary purpose – to reveal sin, to reveal our hopeless and helpless condition, to reveal our need for forgiveness, and to point us to the Savior. It held us in custody until Christ had come into our lives, but after it has served its purpose, the believer must cast out the religious idea of relating to God on the basis of the Law and trying to earn and maintain their salvation. Instead the believer must embrace the truth of what God has already done in Jesus Christ. It’s not about what you do, it’s about what has already been done for you. That’s what it’s about.

Paul was telling the Galatians, *“Spiritually, you’re the children of Sarah, but you’re your living like you’re from Hagar. You are a child of the promise like Isaac, but you’re acting like Ishmael. Why return to bondage?”* And remember this, Ishmael was not the heir. And those who rely on self-effort and self-reliance, those who rely on their works as the way to earn God’s favor and salvation, will unfortunately be left wanting – empty handed.

*On April 14, 1912, the Titanic sank in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. It struck an iceberg just before midnight and sank in the early hours of April the 15th. Before it sailed many people thought it was an unsinkable ship because it had a double hull and sixteen watertight compartments. One person for the White Star Line was quoted, “Even God couldn’t sink her.” Well, the only thing the Titanic did was sink.*

*For many years, experts assumed the iceberg tore a 300-foot gash in the side of the 900-foot long ship. But since the wreckage was located and photographed in 1985, the experts changed their theories. Submersibles using sonar discovered that as the ship scraped along the iceberg, only six small rips were torn into the hull. But these six small rips were in six of the watertight compartments and the water gushed in and caused the ship to sink slowly as the front flooded. On that night 1,522 people lost their lives in the icy waters.*

*There were many famous people on the Titanic. You probably recognize the names John Jacob Astor and the unsinkable Molly Brown. If you’ve seen the movie, you know the main storyline, but there was one hero on the Titanic Hollywood never mentioned. Onboard the Titanic was a Baptist pastor from Scotland named John Harper. He was 39 and he and his 6-year old daughter, Nana, were traveling to America for John to preach at the famous Moody Church in Chicago. John’s wife had died a few years earlier so he was raising his daughter as a single dad.*

*As the ship was sinking, John placed Nana into a lifeboat, but he made no effort to follow her. Instead he turned and ran through the sinking ship yelling, “Women, children and unsaved into the life-boats!” He continued to pass through the crowd, imploring people to place their faith in Jesus Christ. He gave his lifejacket to a man who said he wasn’t a Christian. John said, “Here, you need this more than I do.”*

*As the ship slipped beneath the surface, the water was filled with people clinging to pieces of debris. Of the hundreds of people floating in the icy water, only six were rescued. One of them was a man who met John Harper in the water. Four years after the Titanic sank; this man shared his testimony at a church in Hamilton, Canada:*

*“I am a survivor of the Titanic. When I was drifting alone on a spar that awful night, the tide brought John Harper, also on a piece of wreck, near me. ‘Man,’ he said, ‘Are you saved?’ ‘No,’ I said. ‘I am not.’ He replied, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.’ The waves bore him away, but brought him back a little later. ‘Are you saved now?’ he asked. ‘No,’ I said, ‘I cannot honestly say that I am. ‘He said again, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.’ A short while later he went down, and there, alone in the night with two miles of water under me, I believed. I am John Harper’s last convert.”*

*Religious legalism dictates that you have to do something to be saved. Grace invites you to simply believe and receive God’s free gift of eternal life. When you’re in icy water hanging onto a piece of wood facing the prospect of death, there are no legalistic religious acts you can perform. But you can believe.*

*After the tragic news of the sinking of the Titanic reached both shores, family and friends wondered about the fate of their loved ones. After a few days every major newspaper in the U.S. and England published the names of the passengers. There were only two columns. One column was entitled, “Saved” and the other column was entitled “Lost.” At the end of time, when the Lamb’s Book of Life is opened, there will only be two categories: “Saved and Lost.” Under which column is your name this morning?*

*Thankfully, you aren’t hanging onto a piece of wood in freezing water. But the words John Harper spoke to that man apply to you:* ***Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!***

Source Material:

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