

## Galatians 4:21-31: Children of Freedom

Exegetical Big Idea: The law of God itself speaks that faith in God's promises produces free children, while children born under the law only produces more children slaves to the law.

Homiletical Big Idea: **God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who cannot help themselves.**

Fallen Condition Focus: God helps those who help themselves is utter ridiculousness. That leads to self-righteousness and legalism.

### Intro

I've read Pilgrim's Progress recently. I actually had read the book years ago, but decided to buy it in the original old English.

It's a story all about allegory, which mean the events in the story are meant to teach us something about our lives today. For example, the main character is a man named "Christian", and the whole story is about him going on his journey to the Celestial City. Christian is a picture of the Christian life, and the Celestial City is a picture of Heaven. On his journey he meets people who journey with him, like a man named "Faithful" and a man named "Hopeful". You can tell by their names what kind of character they are, Bunyan doesn't try and hide that.

In one part, Christian and Hopeful get off the path they are supposed to be on and find themselves trapped in a dungeon in a castle. The castle is called Doubting Castle. And the owner of this castle is called Giant Despair. It's a picture of the reality that the Christian life can be filled sometimes with doubts and despair.

And that's exactly what happens to Christian and hopeful. They are locked up with no way out. They cannot break their chains, and even if they could somehow find a way to, they would never be able to get past the giant. So they despair, because there is nothing they can do to bring about their freedom. They are in there for a number of days with no hope. And then all of a sudden there is hope. Christian reaches into his pocket and finds a key. It's been there all along, but he's forgotten about it! And with this key, they are able to open all the doors of the castle, and escape back onto the path to the Celestial City.

The name of the key was "Promise". It's a picture of the promises of God.

This text made me think of that part of Pilgrim's progress, firstly because Paul is using so allegory today just as Bunyan did in his book. Paul is going to use an Old Testament story to show us something about the promises of God. But I also think of that part in Bunyan's book because it's what we are talking about today!

Christian and Hopeful are locked in slavery with no ability whatsoever to help themselves. They can do nothing on their own to bring about their freedom. Does this sound familiar? So how then are they freed? It's not by their own strength, but by relying on the promises of God.

But this grinds against our human nature. We too often have it in our minds that God is sitting up there on his throne looking down on us who have made a mess of our lives, and he says "show me first that

you are sorry, and clean yourself up a bit, then I'll come and help you". We too often subscribe to the notion that "God helps those who help themselves".

But that's completely unbiblical and un-Gospel. And yet that's also what the Jewish legalists from Jerusalem were saying to the Galatians! We're not so different.

The reality is not that God helps those who help themselves, but that God helps those who *cannot* help themselves!

**God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who cannot help themselves.**

**Vv. 21-25 Nobody can take God's promises, they must be received.**

Paul begins this section by asking a rhetorical question. It's not exactly clear who he is talking to. In verse 21 he is speaking to those "who desire to be under the law". It's not clear if he is speaking to the false teachers and called them out, or speaking to the Galatians who are listening to and following the false teachers. It could simply be both, because the idea here is that those "who desire to be under the law" are anyone who is adding works to faith to try and earn their salvation.

But Paul turns this around on them and asks them that if they love the law so much, do they really even listen to it. Paul's use of words here is very interesting. He doesn't say "know" the Law or even "understand" the Law, but "listen" to the Law. Paul here is making a clear distinction between knowing the *content* of something, and truly understand and believing it.

It sounds an awful lot like when Jesus says to the crowds "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". What Jesus is saying there is that simply hearing the words of Jesus not enough! "Hearing" the words of God is a matter of the heart. There were many who heard the parable of Christ, but were blinded to their meaning. It was only those who accepted that Jesus was the Messiah that God opened their ears to hear, understand, and believe what was he was teaching.

It's the same thing here. Paul is about to make the argument that even the Law of God declares "don't be under the Law!"

To show them this Paul rewind to Genesis. Now, these are some hard passages. And it's worth the reminder here that Paul here is using allegory. He's not saying that the events he's talking about from Genesis are meant to be followed. Abraham and Sarah were not perfect. In fact their sin brought about great pain and trouble. But Paul uses them nonetheless as allegory to show us how God works.

So let's rewind to Genesis 16-21 to remember what happened. God had come to Abraham while he was still living in the land of Ur, and called him to leave his father's house and to take his wife Sarai and go to the land that God was going to show him. God had also promised that Abraham would have many many descendants. The problem of course was that Sarai was barren. Abraham himself was 75 years old.

Well they left to the land, and waited. We're not told Sarai's age at this time, but it's possible she was still before the years of menopause. When they had to go down to Egypt because of a famine, Abraham lied about Sarah to keep Pharaoh from taking Sarah as his wife because Sarah was beautiful. So it's possible that though she was barren, she still held on to hope that God would give her a son and fulfil his promise before it was physically impossible for her to have a child. In Sarah's mind, the clock is ticking, and the years are going by. In fact, about 10 years go by and God still has not given her a son.

And here's where the story gets interesting. After about 10 years, Sarah is starting to realize that it is quickly becoming an impossibility for her to have a child. And so she takes matters into her own hands. Sarah decides that receiving the promise of God is too hard, and instead she needs to take it.

So she convinces Abraham to father a child by her maidservant, Hagar, who was a slave. The thinking here is that God has taken too long, and now it's too late, and so they need to make it happen. Just to be clear, this was sinful on Sarah's part and Abraham's part. And yet God was using it.

Well lo and behold a son was born Hagar, and they name him Ishmael. Abraham was now 86 years old. But this is *not* what God had in mind. God had made a promise, and he was going to work according to his promise. God revealed that it was Sarah who was going to have the son of the promise, not Hagar.

It would be 14 years before Sarah would become pregnant. Imagine what Sarah would be going through for those 14 years. Her body continued to get older, she went through menopause and stopped being able to have children. And yet God's promise remained. Finally, after 14 years, she became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac.

So here's the question...why did God wait!? Why not immediately have Sarah get pregnant? She was barren, it would have been amazing enough.

The answer is simply because wanted to emphasize the *promise*. Waiting made sure that there was absolutely no way anyone could say that this happened by the will of Sarah or Abraham on their own. There was simply no way this was able to happen by any power other than God's power alone. This is the point of verse 23. Ishmael *was* the result of the will of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac was the result of the promise of God.

[Growing up I knew where my parents hid our Christmas presents. I never snooped though. I don't remember if my brothers ever did, but I didn't. I did however have a friend who did. Every Christmas I would ask him a few weeks before if he knew what he was getting, and he always was able to tell me. He knew where they were hidden, and waited till his parents were out and snooped. I could never understand it really. I enjoy a good surprise, but apparently my friend could not. I realize now that it was a matter of needed to know for sure. He needed the assurance. When it comes down to it, he needed to be in control. Probably he thought that if he didn't see what he wanted a few weeks before Christmas, he would keep asking for it until finally it showed up in the hiding spot.]

That's what Paul is emphasizing here. Abraham and Sarah felt out of control. And they were! It was simply too hard for them to sit back and not do anything, and the result was Ishmael.

Paul takes this as allegory. Ishmael, who was born "of the flesh" meaning by the will and power of Abraham and Sarah, was born to a woman in bondage. And therefore, her son was born into this same bondage. Isaac on the other hand, was born not of the will and power of Abraham and Sarah, but the will and promise of God, and this son was born from the free woman. This son then, was a free son.

Ishmael represents the slavery of having to obey the whole law in order to be right with God. Look at verses 24 and 25 Paul's referencing of Mount Sinai is a reference to the Law of Moses. When Paul talks about "the present Jerusalem", he's referring to the Jewish legalism that was being taught to the Galatians. Remember in chapter 3 Paul writes that anyone who does not keep the whole law of God is under a curse. He's coming back to that thought here. The Law of God is powerless to create free

people, because those people would need to keep the whole Law in order to be free! And that's impossible! So all the Law can do is make children who are slaves to the law. And try as those children might, they cannot, by their own effort and power take hold of the promises of God.

[Just as a kangaroo gives birth to a kangaroo, or a hippo give birth to a hippo, or a human give birth to a human, so the slavery of keeping the whole law give birth to those who are slaves to keep the whole law!]

But Isaac, was not born by effort. He was simply received. Isaac, is a picture of Grace. Isaac was received exactly *because* Abraham and Sarah could not help themselves. And that's the point.

**God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who cannot help themselves.**

The covenant of grace is what we see next in contrast to the covenant of the Law.

**Vv. 26-28 Grace shows us how small we are, and how big God is.**

Verse 26 starts with "but". Paul is now going to show the exact opposite of the bad news which is Hagar and Ishmael and the slavery of the law. He does this by a simple statement "But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother".

If Ishmael and Hagar are a picture of slavery by trying to do things our own way, then Isaac and Sarah are pictures of freedom when we do things God's way.

Paul talks about a Jerusalem "above", contrasting it with the Jerusalem that was physically present in their time. If the earthly Jerusalem was legalism and slavery, then the heavenly Jerusalem was a city of grace and freedom. If the law produced slaves under the law, then what does grace produce?

Grace produces children that are free. And that's what Paul is getting at when he says that "she is our mother".

If a crocodile gives birth to a crocodile, and an anteater gives birth to an anteater, then grace gives birth to those who are free.

[This is what makes Christmas so special and important. Christmas is about the "incarnation". It's a long word that means God has become human. But the way Jesus became human shows us something. Way back in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned, they took on an identity of sin. They were sinful. Now remember that kinds give birth to the same kind. So if Adam and Eve are sinful, what do they give birth to? Sinful babies. And this truth has been unchanged ever since then. You parents had identities of sin, and gave birth to you, who has an identity of sin. But look at Christ's birth. He did in fact come from Mary, and grew inside of her like every other human, and this points to the fact that Jesus is one of us. He truly is human. But who was Jesus' father? It wasn't Joseph in the true sense. Joseph had nothing to do with it. The baby in her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And if the Holy Spirit is sinless and holy, then the baby conceived by the Holy Spirit is of the same nature, sinless! So you see that Jesus is indeed fully human, but he is also fully God and therefore holy.]

Paul has been calling Christians "children of God". A person is a child of God if they place their faith in the grace of God. Now let me ask you this, if God's grace make you a child of God, and God is your father, and like produces like, then what are you? The answer is holy.

The law does not and cannot make you holy. Only grace can do that. And grace is always God's work. Which is what we see in verse 27.

Paul gives an interesting quote in this verse. He quotes from Isaiah 54, and looks back at Sarah.

The quote is for the barren woman to rejoice, though she has no children. And she is to rejoice because greater are her offspring than the woman who has a husband able to give her children.

At first this makes little sense! How is the barren woman supposed to rejoice at her offspring when she has none? How is it possible that a barren woman has more offspring than a woman who is able to have children?

The answer, is because of God's promise. The picture here is of Sarah before she had Isaac. In the waiting, and in the barrenness, she is called to rejoice. Why? Because God has made her a promise, and though she has not yet received it, the promises of God are so sure, that she can rejoice now while still not seeing it come to pass. She can do nothing to bring it about, and indeed the promise was impossible. And yet, it was nonetheless God's promise, which means it's coming.

How small Sarah must have felt. Powerless to do anything about the promise of God. And that's the point! Grace is meant to make us feel small. And we are meant to feel small because we are. It's not we who bring about the promises of God, but God alone.

But this quote is not only applied to Sarah. Paul knows where this quote is coming from, and he knows that Isaiah was pointing ahead to the future. Isaiah prophesied in a time when the kingdom of Israel was split, but not yet in exile. He prophesied ahead to when they would go into exile, but he also looked ahead to when God would bring them back from exile. Ultimately, Isaiah looked forward to the new Jerusalem, in the new Heavens and the new Earth.

But when Isaiah speaks of a barren woman, he isn't speaking of a person. He's speaking of a place, namely, Jerusalem. He pictures the destroyed Jerusalem that is nothing more than a pile of rubble. The people have been carried off into exile by a power much greater than themselves. Israel is helpless and small, and not able to do anything about it.

And again, that's the point. God brings them to the point of impossibility, to show them that only God is able to work out his promises. God will bring them back, and he did.

But Paul is now applying this to the church. We are slaves and exiled because of our sin. We are small and helpless. There is absolutely no way to rid ourselves of our sin and please God. We are in an impossible situation. And this is exactly where we are meant to be. We come to God not with what little we can muster to give him, but completely empty handed.

[Someone has put it like this: If you come to God with your arms full of what you think you can offer him, then you are unable to receive what he has for *you*. The only way to receive the gift of grace that God has for you, is if you come empty handed to him. Powerless, with nothing to offer.]

In the quote in Isaiah it seems at first glance that the barren woman has no husband, but it's not the case. A few verses down in Isaiah, we read in verse 5 that "your Maker is your husband". Is this not a beautiful picture of the church? The Church is the bride of Christ. And though we are like Sarah at the

moment, and like destroyed Jerusalem at the moment, we can rejoice and break forth in song because God's promises are sure.

It reminds me of when the disciples came to the conclusion that getting into heaven was impossible.

[Imagine for moment I gave you an impossible situation. Imagine I told you I had a grand prize for you to win, something extraordinary. All you had to do was cross the ocean. What are you going to do? Are you going to jump it? Swim it? Maybe build a raft and sail it? All of those are impossible. You are in a hopeless situation. But then I fly to you in a plane, and offer you to get in the plane as I take you over the ocean to win your prize. Would you accept, or would you continue trying on your own? You'd accept! And while you're sitting in the plane who is doing all the work? Me!]

If our sin was an ocean, it would be an infinite ocean. And you and I would be in an even more impossible situation. But...what is impossible for man is possible with God.

That's grace, and it's designed to make us small, so that God could be seen as big.

So which covenant are you part of? There are only two options. Paul says in verse 28 that those who place their faith in Christ alone, for his grace alone are like Isaac and children of promise; free children.

The only other alternative is that you are part of Ishmael's covenant, and are trying to cross that ocean of sin by your own power. It's not going to work, and it'll drown you. Come to the end of yourself, and trust in God's grace. See how small you are, so you can see how big God is. Because:

**God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who cannot help themselves.**

**Vv. 28-31 There is one inheritance, and it all goes to God's free children.**

Paul uses the past picture of Ishmael and Isaac to remind the church of what is still yet to come. Paul goes back to Genesis, and the rivalry between the brothers to show us this. You'll remember that Ishmael was born, and it was 14 years later that Isaac was born. That's a big age difference between them. In verse 29 Paul says that the one born according to the flesh (Ishmael) persecuted him who was born according to the promise (Isaac). The only thing in the Genesis account that we have of that is that Ishmael mocked his younger brother. You can imagine the kinds of things that a 14 year old could think up to mock his younger brother.

So Sarah decides that the child and his mother have to go. This seems harsh doesn't it! Her solution is to kick out Ishmael and Hagar from the family. And what seems even stranger is that God confirms this decision! God tells Abraham to do whatever Sarah says. Abraham is troubled, but listens to God and his wife.

We need to see correctly what Paul is trying to tell us here. It's easy to get hung up on the fact that this looks an awful lot like revenge. It's not. The focus on this is distinction, not revenge. We know it's not because God tells Abraham not to be troubled, since God will take care of Ishmael and Hagar and he has plans to turn Ishmael into a great nation as well. God will not leave Ishmael and Hagar to die in the wilderness.

The point here is that there is one inheritance to receive, and it will not be shared. The whole inheritance goes to Isaac, not Ishmael.

Paul is making the point here that God has a single inheritance, and that inheritance is eternal life and the kingdom of God. That's the inheritance God has to give. But that inheritance is given *only* to sons of the promise, not the sons born into the slavery of sin.

[This is what Jesus told Nicodemus. Jesus said "you must be born again". Nicodemus asked "how can someone go back into his mother's womb? Jesus tells him that's not the kind of birth he's talking about. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but spirit gives birth to spirit. To be born again is to be born "of water and the Spirit" Jesus says in John 3:6]

Being born of the Spirit, is simply trusting in the saving grace of Jesus. This is the only way to be free from the slavery of sin, and be a free son like Isaac. And this is the only way to receive the inheritance of eternal life.

We'll end with Paul's exhortation to the Galatians in verse 31. He begins with "so". In light of all we just talked about, Paul reminds them of what they are. He says "you are not children of the slave, but of the free woman."

Maybe you are coming to the conclusion today that you are a slave to your sin, and are a son like Ishmael. Maybe you are realizing you need an identity change. Today is your day. Be born again, and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

But maybe you are already a Christian, and realizing that it's hard not to slip back into the habit of slavery. It's hard to avoid our human nature of thinking that we have to keep the list of rules to obey God. Legalism hurts our relationship with God, and with each other. It's a destructive thing to think we are better than someone else because we don't sin as much.

This passage exhorts you to "cast it out". There is no better time than the present to confess this sin and ask God to cast it out, and replace it with a spirit of humility and grace.

The reality is that everyone is either an Ishmael or an Isaac. Everyone falls into two camps, either you are trying to help yourself, or realize you can't help yourself and are in desperate need of God to do the work only he can do. There is only help and inheritance for one of those people.

**God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who cannot help themselves.**