

THE GOSPEL AND TRUE FREEDOM
GALATIANS 4:21-31

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

This past week marked the sixtieth anniversary of the famous Civil Rights March on Washington. It was there where Martin Luther King gave one of the most famous speeches in American History. It is entitled "I Have a Dream." Included within the message is a strong emphasis on freedom. This is how it ended.... (LAST 75 SECONDS OF MLK DC SPEECH) [*"And when we allow freedom to ring, ...we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."*]

It was a powerful message. It was sprinkled with Biblical references. It stressed the value of freedom. It had primary reference to freedom from prejudice and racism.

The ideal of freedom is built into the Constitution which governs our country. The preamble of the Constitution declares that it was established to "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." The First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees the free exercise of religion and freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

More broadly American freedom means the right to choose our own government. That, unfortunately, is not a reality in most of the rest of the world. In 2021 an outfit called Freedom House found that 2021 was the fifteenth consecutive year of decline of this political right. It found that less than 20% of the world's population lives in a free country, the smallest proportion since 1995.

Certainly freedom is a Christian and Biblical value. Jesus said that freedom is intimately connected to truth. (John 8:31-32). He claimed that He came to bring freedom to humanity, (LUKE 4:18) In Luke #4 v. 18 Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, saying, **"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty [Some translations have 'freedom'] to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed..."**

The Apostle Paul related this freedom to escape from sin. Because of our identification with Jesus in His death, the Apostle could declare (ROMANS 6:7) in Romans 6 v. 7, **"For one who has died has been set free from sin."** Belief in Jesus results in freedom from the penalty and the power of sin.

The New Testament Book of Galatians, which we have been studying in recent weeks, describes another aspect of freedom. (PROJECTOR OFF) This aspect has special relevance to religious people. The people to whom Paul was writing were mostly new Gentile Christians living in the Roman province of Asia Minor. Jews, claiming to be Christians, were urging these people to follow the Jewish legal code, which meant adherence not just to the Old Testament but also to the many additional rules which had been promoted by the rabbis over the years.

Some of us have come from a religious background which involved a lot of rules and requirements. We may have faced pressure to perform, to refrain, and to earn God's acceptance. The word "free" appears five times in our passage this morning. We shall find that the Apostle Paul here describes the route to true freedom, a freedom from religious legalism.

I.

So we take up the story today in vv. 21-23 of Galatians #4 where we encounter THE STORY OF ABRAHAM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE STORY OF ABRAHAM) Paul is writing to these Galatian Christians to encourage them not to fall into legalism, into a rules based approach to the Christian life. The Gospel is that people are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. Last week we saw Paul take a softer approach to his audience than he did earlier in the letter. He used the imagery of a mom appealing to her children. He begged these spiritual children not to become subject to false teaching. He encouraged them to stay true to the Gospel of grace. In our passage this morning Paul illustrates his point with a story from the Old Testament. Commentators say that this is the toughest passage in Galatians to understand and explain. We will make an attempt to do it.

This is what Paul says in vv. 21 and 22: **"Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman."** The term "law" is sometimes used in the Bible to refer to the Mosaic Law, as recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Sometimes it refers to all of the first five books of the Old Testament. Sometimes the word is used to refer to the whole Old Testament. Here "law" is referring to a story in Genesis.

We saw in #3 that Paul referred to Abraham as a great example of one who was characterized by faith rather than adherence to law. Early in that chapter Paul quoted this verse (GENESIS 15:6) from Genesis #15 v. 6: **"And he [Abram] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."** It was not good works or virtuous behavior that produced a declaration of righteousness. It was faith in God and in His promises. That is the heart of the Gospel. Paul now explains how that faith and that good news message worked out in Abram's descendants. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Jews all claimed Abraham as their spiritual and physical ancestor. Paul sees the story of his life as the source of a great lesson about the dangers of legalism and the value of genuine faith.

So we need to review the story of Abraham's life. Originally he was called Abram. Later God changed his name to Abraham. (PROJECTOR ON--- ABRAHAM TIMELINE) Abram lived around 2000 BC, 500 years before Moses, a thousand years before David, and 2000 years before Jesus. The story about Abram begins at the end of Genesis #11. Immediately we are introduced to a central problem which confronts him. He is called Abram, which name means "exalted father." But Abram has no children.

Initially Abram is living in Ur of the Chaldees (ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY), which was located in what we know today as Iraq. God called him to go to Canaan. Ur had a relatively advanced civilization. Canaan was largely a wilderness area.

The charge from God to Abram is found at the beginning of Genesis #12. (GENESIS 12:1) There we read, **"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. (GENESIS 12:2) And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. (GENESIS 12:3) I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"** In the next verse we learn that Abram is 75 years old when he arrives in Canaan. Wife Sarah is ten years younger. The exalted father has no kids. But God has promised that He is going to make of him a great nation. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Time goes by and he still has no kids. He prospers as a shepherd and a goat herder. A tribe develops around him. But imagine the social interactions which he must have had. He introduces himself to new people as Abram, the exalted father. People naturally ask about his family. He has to explain that he has no kids. He is leader of a tribe of people. They call him Abram, exalted father. What do they think about him? Do some regard him as a kind of laughing stock? He follows this God named YHWH, who has promised to bless him. But he has not one child.

This had to weigh heavily on Abram. One night God has an encounter with Abram. He tells him to look up at the night sky and tells him to start counting the stars. Then YHWH tells Abram that this is how many descendants he will have. It is in this context in #15 that we are told that Abram believed God, and God counted it to him as righteousness.

More time goes by. In #16 Abram is now 85, and wife Sarah is 75. Still no kids. So Abram and Sarah decide that they need to help God out. (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS 16:2) According to Genesis #16 v. 2, **"And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai."**

This might seem strange to us. But this was a normal cultural practice. Archaeologists have discovered marriage contracts from this time period in the ancient city of Nuzi, in what is today Iraq. These documents stipulate that a childless wife is supposed to

provide her husband with a slave girl to provide a child, especially a son to be the heir in the family. This child is not to be expelled from the family. So Abram and Sarai are following the dictates of culture rather than trusting God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Anything like that happen today? Our culture says that in vitro fertilization is an option for women who cannot bear children. Besides the pain and expense and lack of guarantee of success, the moral issue from the Christian perspective is the creation of multiple embryos. There may be ways of getting around that, but as in vitro fertilization is usually practiced there are multiple embryos which are created which typically end up being frozen indefinitely or discarded. If we believe that life begins at conception, then this is a problem.

Even more problematic in a culture which has promoted same sex marriage is surrogate parenting and sperm donation. The US reproductive technology industry is notoriously unregulated. *The New York Times* reported two years ago about a man who had fathered hundreds of children through sperm donation. (Breakpoint, 2/12/2021) What kind of legacy does this leave for children who don't know their father? A 2010 study found that "donor offspring are twice as likely as those raised by biological parents to report problems with the law before age 25." They were also twice as likely to have substance abuse problems and 50% more likely to have mental health problems. (Breakpoint, 10/17/2018)

Hagar is the slave girl who bears Ishmael for Abram. Ishmael becomes the father of the Arabs. According to Genesis 16 v. 4 (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS 16:4), **"And he [Abram] went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress."** Ishmael and his descendants will become a problem for Abraham and the descendants of promise. The Arabs are still in conflict with the Jews today.

More years go by. (PROJECTOR OFF) At age 99 Abram encounters God again. YHWH tells Abram to change his name to Abraham. Instead of "exalted father," he is to be "father of a multitude." Finally, the next year, with Abraham at age 100 and Sarah at age 90, they have the child of promise, Isaac.

Back in Galatians in v. 22 Paul describes Ishmael as the son of the slave woman and Isaac as the son of the free woman. He continues in v. 23: **"But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise."** Ishmael's birth according to the flesh is a description of the use of human means to accomplish God's purpose. Abraham and Sarah were convinced that they had to help God out by following the cultural standards of the day. But it was contrary to the revealed will of God. God is fond of accomplishing only things that He can accomplish. What is the point of talking about Abraham?

II.

In vv. 24-30 Paul tells THE STORY OF TWO WOMEN. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE STORY OF TWO WOMEN) The apostle writes in v. 24, **"Now this may be interpreted**

allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar.” The key verb here is *allegoreo*, from which we get our English word “allegory.” But the original meaning is different from what we understand to be an allegory. Examples of allegory in English literature include *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Both of these works are fictional stories which contain a spiritual meaning.

Here Paul is talking about true history which pictures a spiritual truth. The story might more accurately be described as typology. For Paul finds in this story a foreshadowing of future history.

On one level we might have expected to have the Jews, the good guys, associated with Mt. Sinai, which is where the law of God was handed down to Moses. But Paul sees a closer parallel here between Mt. Sinai and Hagar. She is the slave woman. She is the one who conceived a child in a normal way. There was nothing miraculous about the birth of Ishmael. To follow law and rules is the normal way for humans to operate. It was this which the Judaizers promoted. Their hope was in adherence to the law. They wanted the Gentile Christians to submit to the law handed down at Mt. Sinai to Moses. But it is this devotion to legalism which promotes a kind of slavery.

Verse 25: **“Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children...”** Mt. Sinai is in the Arabian Peninsula. Its exact location is uncertain.

The additional connection which Paul makes is with Jerusalem. We might expect a good Jew like Paul to associate Jerusalem with the good guys, with Isaac and Abraham. For Jerusalem was the location of the temple and the center of Jewish worship. But Jerusalem was the home of the Judaizers. It had become the center of Jewish legalism. It was the place where Jesus had been rejected by the Jewish authorities because he violated their interpretation of the law. Jerusalem bears a closer connection to Hagar than to Sarah.

The verb “corresponds to” in v. 25 literally means “to stand in the same rank or file.” Paul is picturing a chart with two columns. (GALATIANS 4 CHART) One line connects Hagar with Mt. Sinai and Jerusalem and legalism and Judaizers. The other line connects Sarah with Isaac and the promises of God.

Paul adds the Jerusalem above to that column in v. 26: **“But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.”** Apparently there is another Jerusalem besides the earthly Jerusalem. Reference is made to that in Hebrews #12 v. 22. (HEBREWS 12:22) There the author writes, **“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering...”** The Book of Revelation also refers to this heavenly Jerusalem in #3 and #21.

(GALATIANS CHART) This Jerusalem above is our mother. She is a source of life and hope and freedom. She stands in opposition to the earthly Jerusalem, which has become the home of law and legalism and Judaizers. In our recent study of Philippians in #3 we saw Paul say that we Christians have our citizenship in this place.

According to v. 27 in our passage, **“For it is written, ‘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.’”** The quotation comes from Isaiah #54 v. 1. The prophet there was describing Israel, specifically the southern kingdom of Judah, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The nation, including its capital Jerusalem, had been left desolate. Like Sarah, it was seemingly unable to bear children. The situation was bleak.

But the prophet Isaiah said that there was hope. There was a promise from God of an abundant future. The nation would be repopulated. This hope is connected with a promised Messiah. For the preceding chapter, #53, speaks of a suffering Savior, of One who will bear the iniquities of His people.

So it is that the true people of God, Christian Jews and Gentiles, follow the line of faith and promise. They follow in the footsteps of Abraham, who believed God, and was declared to be righteous as a result. His wife Sarah was seemingly unable to bear children. But she also ended up believing the promises of God, and she was blessed with Isaac in her old age. She thus was in the line of promise and the prophets and believing Israel which survived the Babylonian Captivity. In the midst of desolation there was the hope and promise of a restoration.

Paul continues in v. 28, **“Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.”** Believing Gentiles are the true sons of Abraham and Isaac. For they are marked by faith in the promises of God, not by adherence to some religious system. In Hebrew language and custom when someone is characterized by a particular trait, they are called “a child of something.” Thus Barnabas, the traveling companion of Paul, was given his name, which means “son of encouragement.”

Verse 29: **“But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.”** In Genesis #21 we are told that a special day came when Isaac was weaned. Ishmael was thirteen years older than his half-brother. In v. 9 of Genesis 21 (GENESIS 21:9) we read, **“But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing.”** The word “laughing” is probably not strong enough to describe the original Hebrew word. Some translations have “mocking.” That is perhaps better. But there are implications in the usage of the Hebrew word that some kind of sexual activity may be implied. I will look at that in a little more detail in my point to ponder podcast which I will do this week. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So there is a parallel here in how this Ishmael who was born according to the flesh treated Isaac, the child of promise. Ishmael was mistreating Isaac. Paul describes it as

persecution. So also the Judaizers were persecuting the Christian Gentiles. They were harassing them. They were saying that they needed to do more. Belief in the Gospel of grace through faith in Jesus is not enough.

So it was that the religious leaders persecuted Jesus in Jerusalem. They were the spiritual heirs of Ishmael. They were the legalists. They were the ones who added all kinds of requirements to the Old Testament law. They were the ones who said that it was wrong to heal people on the Sabbath. So it was that they failed to recognize the real Messiah when He came along. So it was that they initiated His crucifixion.

We see similar signs of this treatment of genuine Christians down through history by legalists who insist that they must abide by their rules, rules that have no connection to Biblical truth. We see it today going on in the Methodist Church. Christian Methodists who believe in the Bible and the Gospel of grace through faith in Jesus are being harassed by legalists who have come up with new rules which are more consistent with a secular culture which demands acceptance of a new morality. So churches around the country who are wishing to depart from this denomination are often being forced to give up their church buildings and property to this denomination, or they are being forced to pay millions of dollars to a corrupted denomination in order to keep their property.

In v. 30 Paul appeals to the Hebrew Bible: **“But what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.’”** This is a quotation from Genesis #21 v. 10. It is the response of Sarah to the treatment of her son Isaac by Ishmael. The offense is so severe in her eyes that it calls for the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham is very reluctant to do that. He loves his son Ishmael. But God appears to Abraham and tells him to go through with this separation.

The point that Paul is making in this long and complicated illustration is that the Galatian Christians should send the Judaizers packing. The lesson is that Christians should always follow the example of faith and promise and trust in God. They should not follow the path of legalism. Sarah and the child of promise who is the result of faith is the proper model. Hagar and Ishmael who were the result of following the values of an unbiblical culture are not.

III.

We come then to THE STORY OF TRUE FREEDOM in v. 31. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE STORY OF TRUE FREEDOM) The apostle writes, **“So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.”** The Judaizers are the sons of Abraham by physical descent through Sarah. But Paul sees them as spiritually connected with Hagar. They have the right father, but not the right spiritual mother.

True Christians are children of faith and promise. They should not be characterized as religionists and legalists. They should be in pursuit of true freedom.

The problem is that we live in a culture which has adopted a very distorted picture of freedom. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a famous Russian dissident who was kicked out of the Soviet Union. Back in 1978 he gave a famous commencement speech at Harvard in which he warned that the West, including the United States, was heading in a dangerous direction. At one point he said that **“destructive and irresponsible freedom had been granted boundless space.”** In other words, we Americans have come to believe that we should be able to do anything we want, as long as no one gets hurt. Too often people do get hurt in this boundless quest.

In more recent years there was a Supreme Court ruling called *Casey vs. Planned Parenthood* which upheld the abortion decision in *Roe vs. Wade*. In that 1992 decision Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote, **“...at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”** In other words, we humans should have the right to determine our own boundaries. If we want to end an unwanted pregnancy, we should have the right to do it. If we want to have a same sex union, if we want to live together apart from marriage, if we want to try to change our sexual identity, if we want to take drugs, we should be able to do it.

The lesson is too often reinforced in public education and in social media and in the arts. Freedom means claiming our rights. It means being true to ourself. It means pursuing what makes us feel happy. It means seeking self-fulfillment.

The Biblical concept of freedom is much different. The early church leader Augustine argued that true freedom is being what we were created to be. We were created in the image of God. So true freedom is living in conformity to the true image of God. That means following the guidelines which He has given us in His owners manual.

So this freedom paradoxically involves a certain obedience to God, our Creator. Centuries after Augustine Martin Luther wrote a brief work entitled *On Christian Liberty*. In it he said, **“A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”**

A theologian by the name of Roger Olson explains, **“...according to Luther, because of what Christ has done for [us] and because of [our] faith in Christ, the Christian is absolutely free from the bondage of the law. [We don’t] have to do anything. On the other hand, out of gratitude for what Christ has done for [us] and in [us], the Christian is bound in servitude to God and other people. [We] get to serve them freely and joyfully. A person who doesn’t ‘get’ the ‘get to’ part simply doesn’t know the joy of salvation.”** (*Christianity Today*, October 2012)

The legalist says that we have to earn our way to God. The gospel which Paul preached says that our sins are forgiven and we are granted eternal life simply by believing in Jesus who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. We can have the joy of knowing that we are forgiven and that we are going to heaven no matter what. Realization and appreciation for what Jesus has done for us should be reflected in a

desire to serve God and to serve other people. Real freedom comes from being what God wants us to be.