

The Book of Galatians

Lesson 9: The Two Covenants: Hagar and Sarah -- Galatians 4:21–31

Every family has its stories, the ones told and retold until they become part of who you are. For the Jewish people, no story ran deeper than the story of Abraham and his two sons. There was Ishmael, the son Abraham tried to produce on his own when the waiting grew long, born to the slave woman Hagar. And there was Isaac, the son God had promised against all odds, born to Sarah when she was far too old, a living miracle, proof that God keeps his word.

Paul takes this old family story and, under inspiration, shows the Galatians a deeper pattern running through it. The two mothers, he says, stand for two covenants, two completely different ways of relating to God. Hagar, the slave, stands for the covenant of law given at Mount Sinai, which can only produce children for slavery, people forever trying to earn what they can never quite secure. Sarah, the free woman, stands for the covenant of promise, which produces free children by the power of God.

It is a daring reversal. The Judaizers assumed that keeping the law made them the true children of Abraham. Paul says the opposite. Those who try to be justified by law are, spiritually, children of the slave woman, while those who trust the promise are the free children, the children of Sarah, the heirs of everything God pledged. And he reminds them that the free city, the Jerusalem that is above, is even now their true mother and home.

There is a sharp edge to this story too. Just as Ishmael once mocked Isaac, the children of the flesh have always troubled the children of promise, and Paul says it is no different now. But the outcome is never in doubt. Scripture says to cast out the slave woman, for her son will not share the inheritance. As we read, the question presses on us: which mother are we living as a child of, the slave or the free?

Group Discussion: Paul says believers are “children of promise,” like Isaac, born not by human effort but by the power of God (4:28). What practical difference does it make to live as a child of promise rather than as someone forever trying to earn a place by their own striving?

Personal Reflection: Abraham, tired of waiting, tried to secure God’s promise through Hagar by his own effort, and it brought lasting heartache. Where are you tempted to take matters into your own hands rather than trust God to keep his promise in his way and time?

Read Galatians 4:21–31

Study Questions

1. Paul interprets Hagar and Sarah as representing “two covenants” (4:24). What two covenants do these women stand for, and what is the fundamental contrast Paul draws between the way of law and the way of promise?
2. Paul presents two kinds of children, those of the slave woman and those of the free. As you examine your own walk, are you living more like a child of the slave woman, anxiously earning, or a child of the free woman, resting in grace, and what reveals which one to you?
3. Paul notes that Ishmael was born “according to the flesh,” while Isaac was born “through promise” (4:23). What is the difference between what human effort, the flesh, can produce and what God’s promise produces, and why does that difference matter for our salvation?
4. Like Abraham with Hagar, we often try to manufacture by our own effort what only God can give. Where in your life are you attempting to produce, by the flesh, something that can only come as a gift of God’s promise?
5. Paul says, “the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” (4:26). What is this heavenly Jerusalem, and in what sense do believers belong to it and to God’s kingdom now, rather than only waiting for some future earthly kingdom?
6. Paul reminds the Galatians that their true citizenship is in the free city above. How should belonging to the heavenly Jerusalem, and to Christ’s kingdom even now, shape the way you live, spend, and set your hopes day to day?
7. Paul observes that the child “born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, and so also it is now” (4:29). Why does the way of grace so often provoke opposition from the way of the flesh and the law, both in Paul’s day and in ours?
8. Paul prepares believers to expect misunderstanding and opposition for living by grace. When have you faced pushback, misunderstanding, or pressure for resting in grace and freedom rather than in rules and performance, and how did you respond?
9. Paul quotes Scripture’s command, “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” (4:30), concluding that “we are not children of the slave but of the free woman” (4:31). What does this teach about the radical incompatibility of law and grace as ways of being justified, and how do we decisively reject self-justification and live wholly as free children under grace?
10. Look back across the whole passage. Paul calls believers to live out their true identity as free children of promise. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to cast out the slave mindset of earning and to live decisively as a free child of God.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 21:1–14, the birth of Isaac and the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael; Isaiah 54:1, the barren woman called to rejoice; Hebrews 12:22–24, having come to the heavenly Jerusalem and the assembly of the firstborn; Philippians 3:20, our citizenship in heaven; Romans 9:6–9, the children of promise as the true offspring.