

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman.

But the son of the slave woman was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through the promise. This is an allegory: these women are two covenants.

One is from Mt. Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is from Mt. Sinai in Arabia; and she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

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."

Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. 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.

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."

So, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman but of the free woman.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm then and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery

Galatians 4:21-5:1

"Hagar and Sarah, Slavery and Freedom"

So this morning, the first thing Paul has to say to us is that the conflict he faces out in Galatia grows from an argument whose foundation was laid almost two thousand years before Christ in the days of Abraham. You'll remember that Abraham saved his soul one dark, starry night by believing God's promise that God would give him and Sarah a son, and Abraham believed that through their son "*all the families on earth will be blessed.*" So God promised, Abraham believed, and God called him righteous, not because Abraham never did things wrong, but because God had always and would always save people who trust his Word.

And they all lived happily ever after, right? Wrong. God was ultimately faithful to keep his promise to the old couple, but early on God was slow. So Sarah proposed a plan that rich, childless couples often resorted to in the ancient world, and that was for Sarah to offer her handmaiden, the slave she trusted the most, to conceive a child with Sarah's husband Abraham, and then that child would become the offspring Abraham had prayed for. I mean, why wait for God when it seemed possible for Sarah and Abraham to take care of the whole business themselves. So Hagar, Sarah's maid, conceived a child with Abraham "*by the flesh*" Paul tells us.

The problem being that Sarah and Abraham's plan required a degree of selflessness that in the flesh just wasn't within anyone's reach. Once the master's child was on the way, Hagar stopped acting like a maid, stopped respecting Sarah in the company of Abraham, thinking that the old man would protect her because his child was in her womb, but Abraham had no intention of watching an Egyptian slave girl disrespect his wife, so he left Hagar at Sarah's mercy, and Sarah wasn't feeling merciful. It was so bad that, even pregnant, Hagar fled the camp and headed out into the desert where she was going to die, except God intervened.

The good news was that the Angel of the LORD saved Hagar's life and treated her with a sort of grace that no one gave runaway slave girls in the ancient world. The bad news was that God told Hagar to get back to the camp and give Sarah the respect Sarah had trusted her to show. Hagar was so thunderstruck that her master's God had even noticed her that she named that place in the desert "The God Who Sees." And she did go home and bore Abraham's first son, and Abraham named the boy Ishmael, which means "God hears" even though Sarah and Abraham had engineered the whole business themselves with no small amount of drama.

Ishmael, the boy Paul says was born "*according to the flesh,*" grew into his teenage years while Abraham and Sarah still waited for the son God had promised them that dark starry night years before. And then, only after the old couple was long past being able to conceive and bear, Sarah was found to be with child, an event so unlikely that the boy was named Isaac, Hebrew for "He Laughs," because everyone who heard about it did laugh. Isaac was the boy who, Paul tells us, "*was born through the promise...according to the Spirit.*" But poor little Isaac was born into what was a precarious situation in the ancient world.

Ishmael, Abraham's boy by the flesh, was about to become a man at the time that Isaac was only just able to take solid food and drink. Back then, if a child lived long enough to take solid food, the ancients held a feast and propped up the toddler at the head table and cheered him on as he took his first solid meal in public. And at that feast, looming over little Isaac, probably mocking the boy's attempts to eat and look grown up, was Ishmael, who was now old enough to be a positive danger to Isaac, who was still a little boy whose birth had deprived Ishmael of a world of hopes and dreams if only God brought Isaac into the family.

And Sarah, seeing the danger, spoke the words Paul quoted in our passage today: "*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.*" That rivalry could not happen!

Sarah's demand that his firstborn be banished from the camp broke Abraham's heart and drove him to his knees...where to his amazement God told him that Sarah was right! God promised Abraham to look after Hagar and Ishmael in their travels, to establish them as their own great nation in far away Arabia, but then God commanded the old man to give his first-born and the boy's mother a ruck sack and a water skin and to send them out into the desert to meet their fate. They were going to die again except that the angel of the LORD again looked up Hagar and again showed her a well and again promised her a hopeful future far from Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob and the Chosen People of God. So Ishmael would be prominent but not chosen by God.

Paul writes about Hagar, "*Now Hagar is Mt. Sinai in Arabia, and she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.*" It makes a certain sort of sense that Paul would associate Hagar with Mt. Sinai, after all, every time she was in trouble, Hagar wound up in the Sinai desert. What isn't as easy to follow is why would Paul associate Hagar with "*the present Jerusalem*" the old holy city where a temple still stood and all the old rituals were still practiced.

And the answer was that old Israel, even though they were physically descended from Abraham and Isaac, old Israel had become like Ishmael at little Isaac's growing up party. Isaac, the little boy at table, was the child of promise, the child born according to the Spirit, but there was Ishmael behind the table, the son of the flesh, showing everyone how big and strong he was compared to puny Isaac, saying to everyone in the camp in so many words, "I'm the son you want to bank on, I'm the boy who earned the inheritance at my father's side all these years. All this boy's done is get born, take some food and drink from a cup!"

The point being that, now that Christ has come, we either belong to Ishmael or we belong to Isaac depending on whether we trust the flesh, who we are, what we've done, our goodness, our capability, our wisdom, if we depend on that we belong to Ishmael who was big and strong, but, at the end of the day, he was only a slave and entitled to nothing from his father. Or we can believe the promise, depend on the Spirit, become, like Isaac, the little child in the Father's care, trusting the Almighty to make us righteous because we belong to him, and not because of any program we've mastered, or because of any ritual we've performed.

Almost two thousand years later, this is precisely the argument Jesus got into with the temple authorities in the last autumn of his life. Jesus made a promise to believers on the temple porch: "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" So attend to Jesus words, and he promises to work in our hearts to make us morally, spiritually free. "What do you mean?" the authorities say to the sound of a promise. "We're free right now! We are descended from Abraham!"

So was Ishmael, Jesus says to them in so many words, and he reminds them what happened to Ishmael, Jesus said, "*The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!*" Jesus promised. So if Hagar became the mother of slaves, and old Jerusalem decided to trust in the flesh and become like Ishmael, where does a Christian disciple fit in, who, like Abraham, believes in a promise and, like Isaac, is born by the Spirit. Paul teaches us that Sinai is no covenant for us, and old Jerusalem is no longer the sanctuary where we should worship.

Paul writes: "*... the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.*" The other mother in this old story was Sarah, who was barren, unable to bear, and Paul goes on to quote a prophecy from Isaiah 54 that promised that the sins and failures of old, barren Jerusalem would be redeemed by a new holy city, a spiritual place built in the heavens, that will descend to the earth on the day that Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. What Paul is teaching his readers, and us, is that our sanctuary is above, in heaven. No more climbing any physical hills to offer any physical animals to keep any physical customs for us. "*You know the way to the place where I'm going*" Jesus taught his disciples, "*I am the way...no one comes to the Father except by me.*"

The helpless boy at the banquet table, the child of promise who receives gift after gift he hasn't earned and cannot deserve, but he believes. That is the child, born by the Spirit, God will save, and big strong Ishmael will only save his soul by becoming like the little child he laughed at.