

True Freedom: Two Ways to Live

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Well, every now and then on the celebrity entertainment news, there is some news of paternity battles. Paternity battles, and they're always concerned with celebrities, and they usually always involve money.

And here are some people who have been reported to have been involved, allegedly, in paternity disputes over the years. Steve Jobs, Liz Hurley, Boris Becker, Mick Jagger, Justin Bieber, and Diego Maradona.

Now, paternity disputes often result in a paternity DNA test, where the point of the test is to determine whether someone is the legitimate child of the father.

Now, what we've got here in Galatians chapter 4 is a paternity dispute, and it's all about who the children of Abraham are.

Now, in the reading, Paul says Abraham had two sons. So one was the son of a slave woman called Hagar, and one was the son of a free woman called Sarah.

[1 : 0 8] And so what Paul does is he uses them as part of his argument because he doesn't want the Galatians to be slaves like Hagar. He wants them to be free like Sarah.

Now, remember, the Galatians were in danger of listening to false teachers and following and observing the Mosaic law, the Old Testament law, with all its rules and rituals.

There were some Jewish false teachers who wanted the Galatians to follow these rules in order to be accepted by God. But Paul's essentially saying such observance is really a form of slavery.

Now, these are difficult verses to understand. We depict that up when we were reading, but they're crucial to the message of Galatians. So just let me direct your attention to the screen because we've got a picture that will help us understand the verses a little bit.

Isn't that amazing, that graphic? It wasn't done by me, but I thought it was quite useful in helping us think through the contrast that Paul is making here between Sarah and Hagar, between being under the law and living by faith.

[2 : 2 1] So there's a contrast. So just let's be conscious that these are tough verses for us to think through. And yet they are crucial to the message of Galatians.

But in the complexity, the point is very clear, which we'll see. So let's go back to the points. The basic point, I think, is clear.

And it couldn't be more important because this passage really is all about who are the legitimate members of God's family. What does it mean to be part of God's family?

How do you enter into God's family? And Paul, he divides the world, in essence, into two groups of people because there are only two ways to live.

One way is to rely on our own performance, our own human achievement to get us into God's family. That's one way to live. But that's slavery.

[3 : 1 8] The other way to live is to rely on God's promise, to rely on his grace to be received into and welcomed into his family. And that is freedom.

And so we should be forced to ask, as we look at these verses in the Bible, am I a legitimate member of God's family? Paul shows us what that means by taking us back to the story of Abraham in Genesis.

That's why we had Genesis chapter 21 read before Galatians chapter 4. And there are three stages here in Paul's argument. So first, what happened? Second, what it shows?

And third, why it matters. What happened? Paul goes into history to explain the past. Then what it shows? He uses that history in an allegorical or figurative sense to show what it means, really.

And then he moves on to personally why it matters for the Galatians, but also for you and me. So first, what happened? Second, what it shows? And third, why it matters. So first, what happened?

[4 : 23] Paul's looking into history here about two women with two sons in verse 21 to 23. So he wants to show the problem of relying on the law to get right with God.

Verse 21 says, When he speaks about being under the law, he's talking about observing the Mosaic law with all its rules as the way to be accepted by God, which really misses the point of the law altogether.

Now, you get the same thing today. When people think that we can get to God through our human efforts. If I live a good life, if I do lots of good works, surely God should accept me into his family.

Like if I keep the rules and the rituals and the traditions of religion, all the ceremonies, then God will welcome me to himself. And that's what the Jewish false teachers were encouraging the Galatian Christians to do.

And their argument was essentially, if you want to be legitimate children of Abraham and therefore God, if you want to be true members of God's family, then as well as faith in Jesus, what you need to do is become like a Jew.

[5 : 40] You need to be circumcised. You need to keep all the Jewish special ceremonies and then God will accept you. So what Paul does here is he takes on the false teachers at their own game and he beats them.

It's like Paul says, OK, so you want to talk about who the true children of Abraham are. Well, let's see what that actually means. Verse 22, he says, Abraham did have more sons, but the two Paul uses here are for his argument.

So the Jews were proud because they were biological descendants of Abraham. Abraham and two Gentile Christians who thought that they had to live like Jews.

What Paul is doing is he's saying, let's not forget that Abraham had two sons. So in terms of being a legitimate member of God's family, which kind of son are you?

It's essentially what he's saying. So biologically, Abraham was the father of both, but they were different. One was born as the son of a slave woman. One was born as the son of a free woman.

[6 : 50] And Paul wants to highlight this difference to show how the true children of Abraham aren't biological descendants. In other words, they aren't Jewish or need to become like Jews, but they're spiritual.

The true descendants of Abraham are spiritual. And so Paul wants to challenge the people, his readers, on what kind of son they are. Are they the son of a slave woman or the son of a free woman?

Now, the historical background to what Paul's saying here comes from Genesis, mainly chapters 16, 17, and chapter 21, which we read.

Because that's where we read about Abraham. We read about Hagar, the slave. We read about Sarah, Abraham's wife. And we read about their respective sons, Ishmael to Hagar and Isaac to Sarah.

And Paul wants to show how the slave woman Hagar represents trying to get right with God by our human achievement or by our religious observance.

[7 : 52] Whereas Sarah represents being right with God by faith. And so to recap what happened back in Genesis, back in Genesis, God promised to Abraham that he would make him into a great nation.

And he'd be a blessing to all peoples of the earth. But as Abraham got older, his wife Sarah was old. She was barren. And it did not look likely that they would have any children.

But Sarah had a servant called Hagar. And she was young. And she was fertile. And so Sarah said to Abraham, back in Genesis, chapter 16, Abraham agreed and slept with Hagar.

Hagar conceived and gave birth to a son called Ishmael. So he's the son of the slave woman. But God was faithful to his promise to Abraham.

And years later, when Abraham was 100 years old, his wife Sarah gave birth to the promised son. And that was Isaac. So Isaac is the son of the free woman.

[9 : 05] And so verse 23, his son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh. But his son by the free woman was born as a result of a divine promise.

So the two sons didn't just have different mothers. The nature of their birth was also different. Ishmael was born in the ordinary way, according to the flesh.

Whereas Isaac was born in a miraculous way, according to God's intervention. And so despite Sarah being well past childbearing age, God intervened because he had promised Abraham a son.

And that's what Paul wants his readers to get. And so if we go back to the image up on the screen, while Ishmael was born in a natural way as a result of human effort, Isaac was born in the supernatural way as a result of God's promise.

But Paul's not just giving us a history lesson here. What he's saying applied to the Galatians, but it also applies to us. Because Ishmael was born as a result of Abraham's panic, of Abraham's initiative, of Abraham's decision, of Abraham's work.

[10 : 20] Whereas Isaac was born as a result of God's promise, of God's initiative, of God's decision, of God's work. And so there's a fundamental difference between these two sons.

And Paul is showing how these are two totally different ways to relate to God. We can attempt to be accepted by God either by trusting in our own human efforts or by trusting in God's gracious promise.

So look at how Paul fleshes this out. Just this helps us. So the top, we've got the mother and then the son and then the birth. That's where we're up to in terms of our Bible passage.

So let's skip back and we'll move on to the second point because Paul's not just saying this is what happened. He's saying this is what it shows. He's using it as an allegory. So what it shows?

Two covenants. He says what these two women and their two sons means for the Galatians and for us. So verse 24 says these things are being taken figuratively.

[11 : 29] The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves. This is Hagar. Now, when he says these things may be taken figuratively, the actual Greek word he uses is where we get our word allegory from.

And so what he's saying is that we can take the history figuratively. We can learn from it and apply it. And so he doesn't mean allegory in the sense that we might understand allegory today because these are real historical people, but Paul is using them to teach a spiritual lesson.

So these two mothers with their two sons stand for something. One illustrates grace. The other illustrates work. One illustrates what it means to be saved by faith.

And the other one illustrates the attempt to be saved by doing good things or be under the law in terms of the Galatians. So Paul wants to show how Hagar and his son represent salvation by works.

Sorry, her son. And he wants to show how Sarah and her son represent salvation by grace. So it's two totally different ways of relating to God.

[12 : 43] We can rely on our human achievements in order to be saved, or we can rely on God's grace in order to be saved. And so their story is also about your story and about my story and how we relate to God.

So let's just keep this in mind as we work through these verses in this complex analogy. So verse 25. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem because she is in slavery with her children.

So Paul's just said these two women represent two covenants. We know what a covenant is. It's a solemn agreement, one that God enters into with human beings.

And so Paul's saying there's the old covenant and there's the new covenant. He starts with Hagar because she represents the old covenant based on the Mosaic law on Mount Sinai.

And Hagar corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, Paul's saying. That's the old covenant people of God, the Jews. And so although the Jewish false teachers regarded themselves as biological descendants of Sarah, Paul's saying that you're actually spiritual descendants of Hagar, which would have been a massive shock for those Jews.

[14 : 01] But Paul wants to show that they were seeking to be justified before God by their works. They were relying on the law to put them right with God. But it made them slaves like Hagar.

Now remember, Hagar represents people who try to save themselves through their own human efforts. So then Paul contrasts Hagar with Sarah and what she stands for.

So verse 26, but the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother. So Sarah was never a slave. She was Abraham's wife and she was free.

And her son Isaac was also free. So Paul's saying in contrast to the old covenant, there's a new covenant, which is not like the old based on law. The new is based on promise.

And so Sarah stands for the Jerusalem that is above the present city of Jerusalem. It represents the Jews, the people under God's old covenant.

[15 : 02] Whereas the Jerusalem that is above represents Christians, the people under the new covenant. And that's why Paul quotes from Isaiah chapter 54, verse 27.

He says, For it is written, Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child. Break forth and cry aloud, you who were never in labor. Because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.

So when we hear barren woman, we're thinking the analogy to Sarah is clear. She was a barren woman. And yet God blessed her with many children. And so this quotation here is a prophecy that God actually gave to his people for their exile in Babylon.

So Jerusalem is pictured as a barren woman because her children were carried off into exile. But the promise from Isaiah is that God would establish a new Jerusalem that will be filled with far more people than the old Jerusalem.

And so it's ultimately pointing to the worldwide universal church of Jesus Christ, which would be a multitude of people from every tribe, people, language, nation.

[16 : 13] So the promise here is that many people would be brought into God's family. And they would be brought into God's family not by observing the law like the Jews were doing and the false teachers were encouraging, but would be brought into God's family by faith in Jesus.

So can you see what Paul is doing here? Paul is swapping over the family trees, if you like, to prove a point. Because those who try to justify themselves by keeping the law are children of Hagar, slaves.

But those who are justified by faith in Jesus Christ are God's free sons and daughters, children of Sarah. So Hagar represents those who try to be saved through their own human effort.

And Sarah represents those who trust in God to save them by his work in Christ. So these two groups of people that Paul is describing could not be more different, which means that we will either be in one group, free children who belong to the family of God and inherit the promises of God, or will be slaves who are outside the family of God and will inherit nothing.

Let's just take a look at the picture again before we move on to our third point. So first, halfway down, mother, son, birth.

[17 : 45] We're now just past covenant. And I can't see the word. And then, yeah. So Sinai, the earthly Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, present Jerusalem, Jerusalem above, disinherited, and heirs of the promise.

So Paul's gone through all of these different ways of contrasting Sarah and Hagar. Because he's wanting the Galatians to see it will be one way or another in how you relate to God.

Okay, so let's go back to our points. The third point is why it matters, what happened, what it shows, and why it matters.

Paul's moved from history to allegory. And next, he's telling us why this matters personally for the Galatians, but also for us. So if we're struggling to keep up with Paul's argument, the question we need to answer, the personal question that is for us is, am I a legitimate member of God's family or not?

Paul says the Galatian Christians were part of God's family. Verse 28. So they're the true children of Abraham.

[19 : 07] Therefore, they're the children of God. But Paul says this involves two things. It involves persecution and it involves privilege.

So first of all, persecution. Verse 29. At that time, the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.

So the true children of God are born by the power of the Spirit, not through human effort. But the true children of God will be persecuted.

That's what Paul is saying. He's referring to Ishmael's persecution of Isaac. And so in Genesis chapter 21, we read of Ishmael mocking his little half-brother Isaac.

And Paul says it is the same now. So he's telling the Galatians that they are being persecuted. They're being persecuted by the Jewish false teachers. Because instead of letting the Galatians live by grace through faith in Jesus, the false teachers are insisting that they follow all the Jewish rules and regulations.

[20 : 13] And so Paul's saying if we're true children of God, then we can expect to be persecuted just like Isaac was. It continues to happen. Again, persecution comes to God's true children.

It even comes from religious people. So in the church, those who enjoy their freedom in Christ will often be persecuted by those who love religious rules and traditions.

Listen to how John Stott puts it in his Galatians commentary. He says, The persecution of the true church is not always by the world, who are strangers, but by our half-brothers.

Religious people, the nominal church, the greatest enemies of the evangelical faith today are not unbelievers, but the church, the establishment, the hierarchy.

Isaac is always mocked and persecuted by Ishmael. So he's saying that for followers of Jesus, persecution doesn't just come from the outside world.

[21 : 14] It actually comes from inside the established church. And I've seen this to be true. And I'm sure, sadly, you've seen this to be true as well. Where the greatest enemies of the gospel of Jesus Christ are religious people who are part of the institutional church.

And so they'll say things like, well, you don't really believe the whole Bible is the word of God, do you? You can't seriously think that biblical sexual ethics are still relevant in today's world.

Do you really think that? Or you can't arrogantly claim that Jesus is the only way to God. I've heard these things from religious people who are part of the church.

Because when religious people care more about rules and traditions and ceremonies, then they end up opposing those people and persecuting those people who don't care about their stupid rules and rituals and ceremonies.

And they don't care about those things because they believe the gospel, that we're saved by grace through faith in Jesus. And so it's offensive to people who are counting on their own human efforts, their own religious performance to be saved.

[22 : 34] It's offensive to people who think in that way and who rely on their performance. It is a real insult to be told that all your best efforts and all your good works are completely useless before God.

They don't count for anything. Because the issue is not doing enough good works so that God accepts us. The issue is our sin is an offense to God.

And there's nothing that we can do about our sin ourselves. No matter how good we are, our sin will still separate us from God. And so we need Jesus. And religious people hate the notion that they have to put their faith in Jesus in order to be saved.

Can't God just save me because I'm so good and I do so much? I'm very religious. And so there's persecution. But Paul says the persecution is worth it.

Well, why? Because of what God has in store. There's persecution, but there's also privilege. God has promised his true children an eternal inheritance.

[23 : 45] And so Paul quotes from Genesis chapter 21 and verse 30 to show that it was Isaac who received the inheritance. And Ishmael had no share in it. But what does scripture say?

Paul says, Now Abraham wasn't pleased about this.

But afterwards, But afterwards, In Genesis chapter 21, We read this. God said to him, Don't be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, Because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

So the inheritance God promised is only for those who line up after Isaac. Those who are children of the promise by grace through faith.

And so when Paul says, Get rid of the slave woman and her son, He's telling the Galatians to get rid of the false teachers out of the church because they have no share in this inheritance.

[24 : 47] They can't because they're trying to save themselves instead of be saved by grace through faith. And so the true heirs of God's promise are those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

So it's faith in Jesus that you need and I need if I am ever to be and if you are ever to be a legitimate child of God, a true child of God, a true heir of promise.

It doesn't come in any other way than faith in Jesus Christ. And that's what Paul wants the Galatians to grasp and us. So verse 31, he says, Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

So it's the Galatians who are Abraham's children and anyone who lives by faith in Jesus. Otherwise, we'll be slaves if we try and relate to God in any other way by our human efforts.

Okay. As we close, conclusion. Let's put the image up again. Thanks, Matthew. So we've heard about two mothers, Hagar, the slave woman, Sarah, the free woman.

[25 : 59] We've heard about two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. We've heard about two births by flesh and by promise and spirit. We've heard about two covenants, the old and the new.

We've heard about two cities, the present Jerusalem and the Jerusalem that is above. We've heard about two families, slaves with no inheritance and the free who are heirs of promise.

So what Paul is doing is he is making it clear there are only two types of people in this world. There are those who are legitimate children of God and there are those who aren't.

And so there are two ways to live. We can try to save ourselves by our human effort, but it's only slavery. Or we can receive God's salvation by faith.

And that's what it means to be free. So which is it for you? When I was a minister in Edinburgh, there's one pastoral visit that really sticks in my mind and I will never forget.

[27 : 04] It's when I went to hospital, Western General Hospital in Edinburgh to visit an elderly lady. And I think she must have been in her 90s. And I said to her as she was dying, I said, the most important thing right now is that you know Jesus Christ, that you have faith in him as your saviour and Lord.

And you know what her response was? And I'll never forget it. She said, but I've been going to church ever since I was a little girl.

Surely that's enough. But that's not the issue, is it? It never is. What matters is not what we do for God through our efforts.

What matters is what God has done for us through his son, Jesus Christ. And so we need to respond to his son by faith.

Because the only way we won't miss out on everything that really matters is if we have put our faith in Jesus Christ. That is the only way to be free and to inherit everything that God has promised.

[28 : 16] Stay in there. Great. Thank you, everyone. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.