

“Know Your Spiritual Mother”

Galatians 4:21-31

Please open your Bible to Galatians, chapter 4.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we ask you to illuminate your Word for us. Give us, spiritually, the eyes to see and the ears to hear Your Truth. And may your Truth set us free and conform us more and more to the likeness of Your Son! Amen.

Who is your spiritual mother?

That is the question our text repeatedly calls us to ponder.

The text we are studying is Galatians 4:21-31:

21 Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?
22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. 23 His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. 24 These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. 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. 26 But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." 28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. 30 But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." 31 Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. (New International Version)

As we continue our study of Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, we are going to take a closer look at *legalism* and also the all-important doctrine of *justification by faith alone*. The story we have just read may seem like a rather strange story about key figures from Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. We might be tempted to skim over this passage, thinking it to be irrelevant for us today. But if we make such a grave mistake, we will miss one of the richest, most vivid accounts Paul the theologian uses to explain God's covenants and their importance for us today.

The sixteenth-century Reformation was a fight to the death over the issue of whether we are justified by faith *alone* or by faith *plus* works, by grace *alone* or by grace *plus* merit. The true Gospel of free grace had been eclipsed in the medieval church. However, long before the Middle Ages, in the New Testament era, the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith had already begun to erode with the appearance of the Galatian heresy. Agitators within the churches of Galatia who sought to undermine the authority of the apostle Paul, often called Judaizers, argued for a gospel that required works of the law not merely as evidence of justification but as prerequisites for it.

Dr. RC Sproul explains that “this distortion provoked Paul to his most vehement repudiation of any heresy he ever combated. After he had affirmed that there was no other gospel than the one he proclaimed and had declared those accursed who sought to preach “any other gospel” (chapter 1), he then chastened the Galatians” (in chapter 3) (*Tabletalk, August 2002*)

There, Paul says, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? . . . But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith’” (3:1-2, 11).

Paul’s earlier teaching in Galatians provides the foundational framework for his teaching in chapter four. In Galatians 3:10-15, Paul teaches that those who are of the works of the Law (that is, those who are seeking to be saved by their obedience to the law) are cursed, for no one is justified by the Law. However, true believers have been redeemed from the curse of the Law by Christ, who became a curse for them. By faith alone, they have been justified and have received the promise of the Spirit.

In summary form, Paul states in Galatians 2:16, which might be considered the theme verse for the entire book of Galatians, that “a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.” Those who have believed in Christ Jesus have been “justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.” (NAS)

So the first lesson to be drawn from our text relates to our salvation or justification. We are justified or “declared righteous” by faith alone.

In our text, Galatians 4:21-31, Paul addresses those individuals who seek to be justified by observing the Law. You see, the Law was never intended to be a means of salvation. Yet, the Jews had distorted the purpose of the Law, turning it into a legalistic system of works-righteousness. In verse 21, Paul asks those who want to be under the yoke of the Law, “are you not aware of what the law says?”, for Paul believes that the family history of Abraham, as recorded by Moses in Genesis, chapters 16-22, addresses the situation at hand.

Paul says in verse 24 that the Genesis record of Abraham’s family history “may be taken figuratively.” Paul is drawing an analogy between the situation in Genesis and that in the Galatian churches. Paul does this because he observes a figurative representation of the Church therein set forth. (Paul, I think, was a covenant theologian, for he emphasizes, again and again, that Israel and the Church are essentially one and the same.)

So, as redemptive history, the Genesis account not only serves to recount the family history of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael, but also it provides lessons for the Church today.

You will recall from Genesis, chapter 16, that Hagar was the Egyptian maidservant of Sarah (then named Sarai). Sarai tells her husband Abram to have sexual relations with her maid Hagar, since the Lord has restrained her from bearing children. Sarai gives Hagar to her husband Abram to be his wife. But when Hagar sees that she has become pregnant, she begins to despise Sarai. Sarai, in turn, deals harshly with Hagar. And, in response to this ill treatment, Hagar then flees into the wilderness.

Paul recounts the family history of Abraham, by reminding us in verse 22 that “it is written” in the Law of Moses that Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was born by the slave woman (Hagar), born in the ordinary way—i.e., according to the ordinary means of conception (verse 23). Ishmael serves as a type for those Jews whom Paul is addressing who boast of their ancestry and obedience to the Law.

Abraham’s other son, Isaac, was born by the free woman (Sarah). He was born as the result of a promise (verse 23), for humanly speaking, there was no reason to expect that Sarah would or could have a son. She was ninety years old, and her husband Abraham was one hundred (Gen. 17:17). But according to His promise, God graciously intervened and caused Sarah to bear a son (cf. Gen. 17:19, 21; 18:10; 21:1-3). As the child of promise, Isaac serves as a type for those who come to faith under the Covenant of Christ or the new covenant. Believers become spiritual offspring of Abraham, solely by God’s gracious act of divine election. They are born “by the power of the Spirit” (verse 29).

Now Paul says in verse 24 that Abraham’s two wives, Hagar and Sarah, represent two covenants (**Greek, διαθήκαι**), which are the Covenant of Moses and the Covenant of Christ.

The covenant of Moses (the old covenant) and the covenant of Christ (the new covenant) are the two administrations of the one covenant that God made with Abraham: the covenant of grace.

Hagar, the slave woman, represents the Covenant of Moses. This covenant is the one “from Mount Sinai and [it] bears children who are to be slaves.”

John Calvin comments that the location of Mount Sinai—in *Arabia*—is mentioned by way of contempt. He says, “It lies in Arabia, beyond the limits of the holy land, by which the eternal inheritance was prefigured” (p. 122).

As the vast majority of the Jews failed to discern the typological character of the covenant established at Mount Sinai, it became a burdensome covenant of works for them. Such was the case of those Jews in Paul’s day who similarly misunderstood the design of the covenant. These Jews failed to recognize that the old Covenant of Moses was a mere type of the new Covenant of Christ.

By employing this typology, Paul seeks to teach us that those who seek to be justified by obedience to the Law, rather than recognizing it to be their schoolmaster to lead them to Christ (Gal. 3:24), are (spiritually) Ishmaelites in bondage. For the true intent of the Law, or the Covenant of Moses, was to lead the Jews to faith in Christ.

Paul argues in Galatians, chapter 3, verses 24-25, that “the Law has become our tutor [**Greek παιδαγωγός**] to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” The Greek word **παιδαγωγός** is best translated “pedagogue” or “schoolmaster.” In antiquity, the schoolmaster was not the instructor but the agent of discipline. As such, the Law’s purpose was and still is to send us fleeing to Christ for forgiveness and mercy.

Once we grasp the implications of Galatians 3:10—that “**everyone** who does not continue to do **everything** written in the Book of the Law” is “**cursed**,” we realize that Christ is our *only* hope!

Hagar is also said to be a type for *the present Jerusalem*, “because she is in slavery with her children” (verse 25). *The present Jerusalem* denotes the slavish doctrine and worship into which the earthly Jerusalem had degenerated. Though the Jews boasted that they were sons of Abraham, their real mother was in fact Hagar, which made them slaves, born of a slave woman.

Dr. O. Palmer Robertson notes in his book *The Israel of God* that: “The Judaizers in Jerusalem had muffled the freedom of the gospel in favor of the bondage of legalism. The Jews were inhabiting Jerusalem, but it was no longer “the city of God” as it had been under the typological administration of the old covenant” (p. 29).

Abraham’s wife Sarah, the free woman, represents the Covenant of Christ, the new covenant administration of the Abrahamic Covenant or the Covenant of Redemption. Sarah corresponds to the Jerusalem that is above (verse 26). This Jerusalem that is above is equivalent to what the writer to the Hebrews calls “Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22-24) and what John calls “the New Jerusalem” (in Revelation, chapters 3 and 21).

The Jerusalem that is above is now present on earth in **the Church**. Presently, we are “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb. 11:13, NKJ), for Paul explains in his epistle to the Philippians that believers’ citizenship is in heaven (3:20). But after Christ returns, the great, holy city, New Jerusalem, will descend out of heaven from God onto a new earth, which will be inhabited by His glorified Church, which is His bride, the Lamb’s wife (cf. Rev. 21:1-2, 9-11).

Nevertheless, by faith and in spirit (that is, by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit), we are even now spiritually citizens of that heavenly space designated as *the Jerusalem that is above*.

In **verse 27** of our text, Paul quotes from **Isaiah 54:1**. In Isaiah, **Israel** is described as a mother, who although not in labor, yet shall be blessed. This barren woman will have so many children that she will need to expand the size of her tent or dwelling place (Isa. 54:2).

Paul applies Isaiah’s prophecy concerning Israel to *the Jerusalem that is above* (verses 26-27). By identifying the barren woman as *the Jerusalem that is above*, which is *our mother*, Paul shows that Israel serves as a type of the Church. Isaiah’s prophecy thus looks forward to the birth (or the establishment) and enlargement of the Church under the new covenant.

Indeed, Isaiah goes on in chapter 54 to describe how God will renew His marriage vows as Jerusalem’s husband, and will rebuild her with jewels and precious stones. But he is not talking about the earthly Jerusalem; rather, he is previewing John’s vision in Revelation 21 of “**the New Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” and “decorated with every kind of precious stone” (Isa. 54:11-12; Rev. 21:1-21).

So Isaiah is telling a mother who has no children to rejoice in Christ, through whom she will have spiritual progeny. As a result of the work of the Suffering Servant (cf. Isa. 53), the *Jerusalem that is above*, as typified by Sarah, shall give birth to a great multitude of spiritual descendants. She will be the joyful mother to the “Israel of God,” begotten from among the Gentiles (Gal. 6:16).

Paul says in verse 26 that *the Jerusalem that is above* is free from bondage, and so is the Church. For Christ has redeemed His Church from the curse of the Law, having become a

curse for Her (Gal. 3:13). Therefore, if you are a Christian, you are not a child of the slave woman, but of the free woman (verse 31).

In verse 28, Paul tells us that just as Sarah's son Isaac was a child of promise (verse 23), so also we are children of promise. Gentile believers have been adopted by God's sovereign election as children of Abraham, in fulfillment of God's promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations (Gen. 17:3-6). Paul writes in Galatians 3:29, "[If you are in Christ] If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (NIV).

Thus, the new covenant administration of the Abrahamic Covenant is not limited to one nation or ethnic people. No longer is any earthly city or nation set apart as holy. Rather, all believers—Jew and Gentile, black and white, Latino and Asian—are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God's own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). For in Christ Jesus, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female," but all are one body, the body of Christ (Gal. 3:28).

In verse 29, Paul argues that Ishmael and Isaac illustrate the conflict between flesh and Spirit, which continues to the present day. For just as Ishmael persecuted his brother Isaac by mocking (Hebrew מִצְחָק) or ridiculing him, so also the children of the Law (or the Judaizers) persecute the true children of promise by boasting of their outward ceremonies, circumcision, and their outward obedience to the Law.

And it is the same now. Christians are being persecuted throughout the world. Even in America, Christians are routinely mocked and ridiculed on television and in the media. And religious people hardened by their unbelief ridicule the evangelical, Bible-believing, church. Why? Because, there is a spiritual war raging. And those who are of the flesh, those who are Satan's slaves, are at war with God and His people, just as the conflict between Ishmael and Isaac so vividly illustrates.

Paul's teaching in Galatians 4 closes with a stern warning to the Judaizers at Galatia. Citing Genesis 21:10, Paul warns those who seek to be justified by the works of the Law that they will one day be declared Ishmaelites, sons of Hagar, sons of a slave who are unworthy of the eternal inheritance (verse 30). All those who are under the Covenant of Moses (i.e., all those who seek to be justified by their works) shall not be heirs of the promise given to Abraham, for "by observing the law no one will be justified" (Gal. 2:16, NIV).

Rather, it is only those who are in Christ (those who have been justified by faith alone), those who are spiritual sons of Sarah and thus partakers in the new covenant, who shall be heirs according to the promise (cf. Gal. 3:29).

Dr. O. Palmer Robertson writes in *The Israel of God*: "Only those who have been born from above by the outpouring of the Spirit from the throne of Christ, situated in the heavenly Jerusalem, can claim to be citizens in the kingdom of God" (p. 30).

So what about you?

Who is your spiritual mother?

The free woman or the slave woman?

Have you trusted in Christ alone—in His cross work; in His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection? If you have, then you are a spiritual Jew and the spiritual child of Sarah, the free woman.

But if you still trust in your own righteousness, in your own goodness, in your own works to save you, then our text teaches that you are a spiritual child of Hagar the slave woman.

Christ will soon return as Judge of the living and the dead. On this last day, He will separate His true children from those who falsely profess His name. In verse 30, Paul says, “But what does the Scripture say? “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son”” (cf. Gen. 21:10).

If you don’t know Christ, there yet remains hope for you, if you place your faith in Him alone, realizing that no one can be declared righteous before God on the basis of anything he or she does. Rather, it is only by God’s sovereign grace that we are declared righteous on the basis of the merits of Christ—on the basis of His perfect righteousness, which is imputed to us; reckoned to our account; and received by faith alone.

So trust in Him now. For Jesus said in John 8:34-36, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

That is a promise. If you truly repent of your sins and trust in Christ alone for salvation, you will be adopted as God’s son or daughter. You will be an heir according to the promise.

KNOW YOUR SPIRITUAL MOTHER.

If you are a Christian, then your *spiritual* mother is the church, the Jerusalem that is above, the New Jerusalem. And you have been set free from slavery, free from bondage to sin and the devil, free from the tyranny of legalism. For “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).

The church is your spiritual mother. She loves you, cares for you, and looks out for you. She spiritually feeds and nurtures you. And she warns, instructs, and disciplines you.

And what is the church?

We are the church. We are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. And, we, as the body and bride of Christ are to act as a “mother” to one another. Paul says in **Galatians 5:13** that we have been set free so that we might “serve one another in love.”

May we be the church that God has called us to be!