

Galatians

Unbound, Unchained, Unbroken

Week 9 | Galatians 4:21–31

Lisa Scheffler, author

Have you checked out on the audio version of the Engage God Daily yet? Find it at bit.ly/EngageGodDaily

Stories can be a great way to teach a lesson to kids. Depending on the culture you grew up in, you may remember “The Three Little Pigs” as a lesson about working hard and being prepared, “The Tortoise and the Hare” teaches that slow and steady wins the race, “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” shows the consequences of lying. Stories are also a great way to explain things to adults too. Jesus taught in parables, and preachers usually include illustrations in their sermons. Stories are engaging, and illustrate truth. Sometimes they help us find meaning and connections that we might otherwise miss.

This week, we’re going to see Paul use a story from the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) to make a final point about the law. Paul has used all kinds of tools to persuade the Galatian church of its error, and he’ll use a story from Abraham’s life as one more tactic to discredit his opponents and encourage the Galatian Christians to trust in Christ alone.

Day 1

So far in Galatians, we’ve seen Paul use arguments from Scripture (3:6–14), from covenants (3:15–25), and from sonship (3:26–4:20).¹ In our passage for this week, he’ll retell a familiar story with a different twist. In chapter 3, Paul brings up the covenant that God formed with Abraham. Abraham entered into this covenant by faith, and his faith was “credited to him as righteousness” (Galatians 3:6). Paul is now returning to the life of Abraham to make one last appeal to the Galatians regarding the law, but this time he’ll tell the story of Abraham’s sons as an allegory. An allegory is a story packed with symbolism that reveals a deeper meaning.

As you read the passage, notice how Paul gives meaning to certain elements in the story of Hagar and Sarah. Paul is also going to build a strong contrast. Notice what he’s contrasting.

¹ Scot McKnight, [Galatians](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 228.

Read

Galatians 4:21–31 (NIV)

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 according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

²⁴ These things are being taken figuratively: 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, barren woman,
you who never bore a child;
shout for joy 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.”*

²⁸ Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. 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. ³⁰ But what does 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 and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

- What contrast is Paul making?

Respond

Throughout Galatians, Paul has emphasized the importance of faith in God’s promises over works of the law. He is now reaching back again into Israel’s history to show that God has always kept his word as an act of faithfulness. That is what we rely on — that God will keep his promises, the way he has through Jesus. Our faith in Jesus brings freedom, our faith in our own human efforts is slavery.

How have you grown in faith during our study of Galatians? Are you learning to find freedom in Christ and a deeper appreciation for your inheritance as an heir of God?

What circumstances in your life are testing your faith? How can you apply what you’ve learned through God’s Word to that circumstance?

Meditate on these questions as you go through the week.

Day 2

Lisa Scheffler, author

Listen at bit.ly/EngageGodDaily

God acts in unexpected ways. As you read through the Bible, you'll discover times when God broke into history and intervened in a human situation to make his presence and will known in an undeniable way. Yet, if his people aren't patient, or not willing to cooperate with God, they can miss the miracle, or even make the situation worse.

Of all the people on the earth, God chose Abraham to be the father of his people. God promised to create a family through Abraham, and ultimately, his line would culminate in the Seed of Abraham, Jesus. Yet God wanted it to be clear that this family didn't come through ordinary, human means, but as an act of his supernatural grace. Abraham's wife Sarah was unable to bear children. Yet God promised a son. Abraham and Sarah began to doubt God's promise and tried to help God along.

Today we're going to consider Abraham's two sons and the mothers who bore each of them.

Read

Galatians 4:21–24a

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 according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

²⁴ These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants.

- Who was the mother of the child of the promise? Who was the mother of the child of the flesh?

Reflect

Let's take a trip back in time to Genesis to read the story that Paul is referencing in these verses. Notice which son of Abraham is the one who was promised. (Note that later in their journey with God, changed Abraham's name from Abram and Sarah's name from Sarai.)

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; ² so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. ³ So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. ⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. (Genesis 16:1–4)

¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. (Genesis 16:15–16)

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. ² Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴ When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. (Genesis 21:1–4)

- Earlier in our study of Galatians, we defined “flesh” as any activity done outside of the Spirit. It is activity that flows from unbelief rather than faith. How is Ishmael the son of the “flesh” and Isaac the son of the “promise”?

At the center of the argument that the Galatian Christians were falling for was that Gentile believers needed to become Jews. Once they were circumcised and following food laws and other restrictions, they could become part of God's family. It was then they would become children of the promise. What we will see in Paul's counter argument this week is that the true people of God rely his promises, not works of the law, and that brings freedom.

Paul is making the same argument he's been making, but coming at it from a different angle. He's built to a climax and is using the story of Abraham's sons to confirm to the Galatian Christians that they became God's sons and heirs through faith in Jesus.

Acts of the “flesh” flow from unbelief. At the root of our disobedience is a lack of trust in God and his goodness. When we commit overt sin, we are imitating Eve who bought the Serpent's lie that God was holding out on her. When we fail to wait on God to fulfill his promises according to his will, and at his time, we are telling God that we know better than he does.

Maturing as a believer means growing in our faith in God. We can trust him. He is our Father and we are children of promise.

Respond

It's not uncommon for us to be like Abraham and Sarah. When it seems like God is taking too long, we decide to “help” God out with our own human efforts. Can you relate to their story? If so, how?

Day 3

Lisa Scheffler, author

Listen at bit.ly/EngageGodDaily

Jerusalem was not just a city to the Jewish people, it was a powerful symbol of God's presence and promise. It was the home of the temple, designed as the dwelling place of God. It was the seat of power during Israel's most prosperous period under King David and King Solomon.

At the time Paul was writing, Jerusalem was under Roman occupation. The city of Paul's present was nothing like the city that lived in the Jewish imagination — as they looked back to their glorious past or forward to the future reign of the Messiah. Yet, there was always a hope. The prophets spoke of a restored Jerusalem, more glorious than the city at the time of David. This future Jerusalem, the one from above, is the one that Paul speaks of in our verses for today.

Read

Galatians 4:24–27

²⁴ These things are being taken figuratively: 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, barren woman,
you who never bore a child;
shout for joy 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.”*

- What are the two places Paul mentions?
- What are the two covenants these women represent?

Reflect

Notice the contrast Paul is making between Hagar's son and Sarah's. Each one is associated with a place from Israel's past, and one is associated with a place in the future. Paul associates Hagar with Mount Sinai, the place where God gave Moses and the people the law. It was there that they swore to obey the law to meet their obligation to the covenant God made with them.

We have already seen in Galatians how Paul leaps back over the Mosaic covenant to emphasize the Abrahamic covenant — one based solely on God’s faithfulness to his own promises.

The other place that is mentioned is Jerusalem. Recall that Paul’s opponents came from Jerusalem and likely claimed authority because of that. Paul sees the present city of Jerusalem as a pale comparison to the city that is above. Not only is it enslaved under Roman occupation, but because most of the Jewish people had rejected their Messiah, it is under the slavery of the old covenant.

Notice also that Paul is quoting from Isaiah. Scot McKnight explains the connection between Sarah and Isaiah’s prophesy:

“The children of the ‘barren woman’ is from Genesis 11:30, where Sarah is described as ‘barren.’ But this Sarah is connected to Isaiah 54:1 by the word ‘barren.’ In 54:1 we have promises of God that he would restore Zion (Israel). Thus, Isaiah is predicting the future Jerusalem. In fact, by associating their being the true Jerusalem in the sense of fulfilling 54:1, Paul is saying that those who believe in Christ are living in the new era, the era of fulfillment.”²

Did you catch that? We’re living in the new era! The era where God’s promises are being fulfilled. We will not experience all of them fully until Christ returns, but in the Spirit we are already being made new. The new Jerusalem is just beyond the veil, but as its citizens, we can begin to bring the peace, goodness, and justice of that city into our own.

Yet, before we leave these verses, we should check to see who’s side we’re on. Paul is making a stark contrast in this passage. Whose covenant we are living under. All those who believe in Jesus, trusting God’s promise rather than their ‘fleshly’ identity, belong on the Isaac-side, while those who claim to represent “present” Jerusalem belong with Ishmael.

Respond

Paul has drawn a clear line in the sand. Either you are trusting in Jesus by faith or you are trusting in your own efforts by keeping the law. You can’t do both. Which side of the line do you live on? What does that mean for *how* you live?

Day 4

Lisa Scheffler, author

Listen at bit.ly/EngageGodDaily

² Scot McKnight, [Galatians](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 231.

Early in Galatians chapter 4, we saw Paul unpack the amazing truth that in Christ, we are God's children and heirs. To return to living under the law is a return to slavery. To live in Christ and by the Spirit is freedom. Paul returns to the idea of inheritance as he comes to the climax of his argument in the verses we'll look at today.

Read

Galatians 4:28–31

²⁸ Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. 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. ³⁰ But what does 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 and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

- Who does Paul consider his brothers and sisters? Which covenant are they under?

Reflect

The story of Abraham was well-known and may have been used by Paul's opponents against the Gentile Christians. Most scholars assume that Paul is turning his opponents use of this story back around on them. Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn son, but he was not Abraham's heir. Although he had been circumcised, he and all his descendants were Gentiles, not children of the promise and therefore not part of the covenant family. Yet here, Paul is calling those who follow the law the children of Ishmael, not Isaac. This would have been shocking to his opponents.

Consider the conclusion of commentator Craig Keener who sees Paul reversing the argument Paul's opponents had been making:

"Because his opponents neglect the promise, the way of the Spirit, it is they who are outside the covenant. They are spiritual Ishmaelites, circumcised yet missing the very fulfillment that the law had promised....Abraham's son Isaac represents not only Christ as the promised seed (3:16), but also those who are in him (3:29)."³

Paul is elevating the status of Gentile believers by identifying them as children of promise. They had been harassed by Paul's Jewish Christian opponents. Gentile Christians had been treated like outsiders. Recall how Paul rebuked Peter for refusing to dine with uncircumcised Gentile believers (Galatians 2:11-14).

As Walter Hansen points out, "Genesis says that Ishmael mocked Isaac (Gen 21:9). Interpreting this text in the light of his own experience, Paul saw Ishmael's treatment of Isaac

³ Craig S. Keener, [Galatians: A Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 401.

as derisive and abusive.” Paul is drawing the conclusion that “One personal consequence of being like Isaac is being mocked and persecuted by ‘false brothers’ like Ishmael.⁴

Here is how N.T. Wright sums up this passage:

“The point Paul wants to emphasize is that ‘we’—Paul himself, and those who believe the gospel he has preached—cannot be labelled as outsiders, second-class citizens, or Abraham’s illegitimate family. Those who believe the gospel are, like Isaac, promise-people, the free family of God.”⁵

Respond

What does it mean for you to be a child of the promise? In the line of Abraham’s miracle son, Isaac? Reflect on that today.

Day 5

Lisa Scheffler, author

Listen at bit.ly/EngageGodDaily

Happy Friday!

Let’s take some time reflect on what we’re learning here in Galatians, spend some time with the Father as we rejoice in the work of the Son, and ask the Spirit to guide us according the Word.

Reflect

Take another look at [Galatians 4:21–31](#)

- What are Paul’s main points in this passage? Why do you think he uses the story of Hagar and Sarah’s sons? Why would that be an effective way to reach the Galatian Christians who’d been led astray?
- What has stayed with you personally as you’ve studied this passage?

Connect

⁴ G. Walter Hansen, [Galatians](#), The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Ga 4:28–30.

⁵ Tom Wright, [Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 60.

It's not easy to wait on the Lord to act. To stand on his promises when all the circumstances that surround you are screaming, "God's not coming through!" Yet the Bible is full of stories of people who had to wait on the Lord. Not only Abraham and Sarah, but Joseph in prison, the people crying out from slavery in Egypt, Israel waiting to enter the promised land, an anointed King David living on the run from Saul, and on and on.

But God always comes through. And when we doubt, we can look to the cross and the resurrection — the fulfillment of God's promise to save his people and dwell with them. God is true to his word. Always faithful.

So let's live like children of the promise, because that's who Paul says we are. We look backwards to the cross, but also forward to Christ's return and the new Jerusalem. Mediate on the description of the new Jerusalem in Revelation — the new city that awaits the heirs of God:

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Revelation 21:1-5)

Respond

Slow down, pray over these prompts, and ask the Spirit to direct you.

Ask the Father:

- What do you want me to take away from what I've studied this week? What do you want me to remember and keep present with me?
- What do you want me to do with the truth of your Word? What is the one, next, right step that you want me to take?
- What are you teaching me about you? About who you are and the relationship I have with you? How can I worship and love you based on what you've revealed?

Pray for the opportunity for meaningful conversations— to share the good news of what Jesus has done for us! Who do you know who needs to know that God is always faithful to his promises? How can you encourage them this week?

Next week

Next week's Engage God Daily will be a special Mother's Day edition with a special guest author! We'll be talking about how we can show grace to all the mothers, mentors, and caregivers in our lives. You don't want to miss it!