

Have You Thought Through the Implications of your Beliefs?

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[0 : 00] Tonight's reading is from Galatians chapter 4, beginning at verse 21. It's on page 1171 of the Pew Bibles.

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.

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. 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. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem because she is in slavery with her children.

But the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother. For it is written, be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child.

[1 : 15] 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. Now you brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise.

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. 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.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. Let's pray as we sit.

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Happy Mothering Sunday. Did you know that tonight's passage is the very reason why Mothering Sunday is the day it is? In the Book of Common Prayer, it's the epistle reading, one of the Bible readings at Holy Communion for the fourth Sunday in Lent.

[2 : 39] And people would hear this reading year after year and they'd hear about the mothers and they'd hear about Jerusalem, our mother. And they didn't really understand the passage, so they just thought about their own mothers.

And then it became the custom on this particular day for those in service to go and visit their mothers. I mean, it seemed an obscure passage and that was the best response you could make to it.

Which, of course, wasn't that bad a response. I mean, visiting one's mother is a good thing. So thank you, James, for choosing this passage for tonight. So if you haven't rung your mother yet, today's the day and you need to go and do that after the service.

But don't go now because there's lots to learn from the passage and I want you to enjoy it. Because it is a story about two ancient mothers that has something very different to teach us from go and give your mother a ring.

This passage is the climax of two chapters of argument. The Galatians had come to faith through Paul's preaching, but they'd been unsettled by some incomers who said that faith in Christ was a good start, but that Christians need to obey the whole Jewish law.

[3 : 54] They need to be circumcised, etc. And so Paul says in verse 21 to them, Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you aware of what the law says?

So what he's saying to them is, if you're law people, what does the law say? What are the implications of the law for you? And then in this passage, he draws our attention to the story of Abraham.

Now Abraham comes at the start of the story of God's people. God reveals himself to Abraham and makes a marvellous promise to him that he will have a great family through whom all people will be blessed.

And we know that one of his descendants is Jesus, through whom all nations are indeed blessed. But for Abraham to have this family, that depended on Abraham having a child.

And through a good chunk of the story of Abraham, he doesn't have a child. We know in the end that Abraham and his wife do have a son, Isaac.

[5 : 09] But Paul's making a much more subtle point tonight. He's pointing out that Abraham had two sons. In fact, he had another six sons later on.

But the two sons are the important ones as far as the argument's concerned. In verse 22, it is written that Abraham had two sons. One by the slave woman and one, the other, by the free woman.

So there are these two sons. There's Ishmael, who was born first, who's the son of Hagar, who was Abraham's slave. And then there's the second son, is Isaac, who was son of Sarah, who was Abraham's wife, and a free woman.

As I said before, God had promised Abraham a son. When there was a long delay, Sarah and Abraham fixed up a scheme whereby they would get a son, and Abraham had a son by his slave, Hagar.

But the promised son was Isaac, born, I think it was 14 years later. Now the incomers, who were leading the Galatians back into law-keeping, may well have made the point that they were not only children of Abraham, as indeed the Jews are, but that they were legitimate children by Sarah through Isaac, as indeed the Jews are.

[6 : 39] We'll wait and see how that argument turns out later on. But for now, Paul says there are two sons. We've got them, Ishmael and Isaac.

And there are two mothers. Those are Hagar and Sarah. And then he goes on to say that there are two births in 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 point there is that Ishmael was conceived in the normal way, when the fulfillment of God's promise was delayed.

But Isaac was conceived in the normal way in one sense, but he was a definite fruit of God's promise. Sarah was very old. It was a great surprise.

So there were two sons, two mothers, two births, one absolutely normal and one, in a sense, supernatural.

[7 : 50] And then he goes on to say there were two covenants. Verse 24. The women represent two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves.

This is Hagar. So that covenant is the covenant of law based on Mount Sinai. The other covenant isn't actually specified, but is presumably the covenant of grace based on Mount Zion.

Two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Two mothers, Hagar and Sarah. Two births, the normal and the supernatural, the one of promise.

Two covenants, that's law and grace. And then there are two cities. Verse 25. Now, Hagar stands from Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem because she is in slavery with her children.

But the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother. So the two cities are physical Jerusalem and heavenly Jerusalem.

[9 : 06] Physical Jerusalem corresponds to Hagar and slavery. Heavenly Jerusalem corresponds to Sarah and freedom.

Heavenly Jerusalem is mother church. Not physical Jerusalem. Now, maybe the incomers said, you know, we're real Jerusalem supporters.

We've come down from the mother church and we're going to tell you the way you should do it and you should go for keeping the whole Old Testament law. If that's so, said Paul, if there really is authority in Jerusalem, then it's heavenly Jerusalem, not physical Jerusalem, that is our mother.

It's heavenly Jerusalem that we look to. We look up. We don't look to physical Jerusalem. So that all seems quite complicated and I suspect it might.

The question is simply this. Which son, Ishmael or Isaac? Which mother, Hagar or Sarah?

[10 : 21] Which birth, natural or supernatural? Which covenant, law or grace? Which city, physical or heavenly, do you relate to?

Which set of five things do you relate to? So let's go back to where they were. We've got the incomers who reckoned that they were the Isaac, Sarah, supernatural, etc. group and they wanted to bring the Galatian, the Galatian Christians who were probably not Jews originally, wanted to bring them who they reckoned were Ishmael, Hagar, etc.

into Isaac's family. I wanted to move them across from Ishmael's heirs to Isaac's heirs. But Paul says it's not like that at all.

You Galatians or you St. Silas members are Isaac's heirs already. You're born of the free woman.

You're born supernaturally. You're in the covenant of grace. You're looking to the heavenly city. You don't need to move into law, etc.

[11 : 47] In fact, the incomers are Hagar's children. They're in slavery and wanting to bring other people into slavery. They're not Isaac's heirs as they thought.

And then the passage goes on with two key Bible quotations. Let's go to verse 27. Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child.

Break forth and cry aloud, you who are never in labor, because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband. Now, what's the significance of that?

In a moment, I'll come to its content. But first, let's look at where it comes from. If you look at the bottom of the page, you'll see it comes from Isaiah 54, verse 1. Now, you probably don't know Isaiah 54, unless your Bible knowledge is really great, but quite a lot of you will know Isaiah 53, perhaps one of the most familiar bits of the Old Testament.

Isaiah 53 is the story of the suffering servant, which ends, for he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors. Christians understand Isaiah 53 as focused on Jesus, as being about Jesus.

[13 : 11] So, this verse follows immediately after that passage, which is not only about Jesus, but it's about Jesus and his sacrificial death for us.

So, it's the cross which means that the barren woman bears a child. It's the cross that means that we can shout for joy and cry aloud.

It's the cross that means that there are many, many children. It's the cross that this picture of lots of children goes with Sarah, who was, of course, a barren woman, and then has children.

It's the cross that means that we are part of a great number of people who are saved by grace. It's the cross that frees us from striving for acceptance with God by the works of the law.

That's why that passage, I think, that's why Paul quotes it. As Christians, we've come to faith in Jesus.

[14 : 24] We don't need additional works. It's all been done for us by him. That's why we're free. It's why we're part of Isaac's family, not Ishmael's.

In fact, verse 28 unpacks that very clearly. Now, you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. children not of works, not of some dodgy scheme that Abraham and Sarah cooked up that they would be able to achieve a son that sort of half achieved what God had promised but didn't quite do it.

We are sons and daughters born by the power of the Spirit in the next verse. forgiven forgiven not by works but by Jesus' death for us.

And then there were two more conclusions in the last verses of our passage. 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 what he's saying there, well, we're going back then to our first reading from Genesis 21 and verse 9.

[15 : 54] That passage was about, we had a reference to Isaac's weaning feast. I think we missed out, our children missed out on a weaning feast as far as I remember. Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian, that's Hagar, the slave girl, had born to Abraham was mocking Isaac.

Ishmael mocked Isaac. Now, Paul says the legalists, those who want us to gain our acceptance with God through works of the law, persecute those who believe in the gospel of grace.

Even in the church, there are those who put down those who seek salvation by grace through faith rather than by works. And then I think we come to the climax of the passage in a funny way.

It's verse 30. I mean, if we go back to the original question, if we haven't lost it in the complexity of this quite complex passage, the original question 21 was, tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?

And the specific quotation we have, what does the scripture say? Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman and the son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.

[17 : 22] That's Genesis 21 verse 10. The very words of Sarah in that passage. What that verse says is that only Sarah's children can inherit.

So that's one more time to reiterate the main point. What's the fundamental distinction between being children of Sarah and children of Hagar? Ishmael, Hagar's child, is the result of what human beings can do.

Isaac is the result of God's grace, what God does. Ishmael is the result of self-reliance. Isaac is the result of faith.

Isaac comes as a result of God's promise. We inherit the Old Testament promises, not by obeying every detail of the law, but by trusting God, as Abraham did.

And God's gift gives us freedom. Freedom from law, freedom from guilt, freedom from wrath. Verse 31, therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

[18 : 44] And then chapter 5 is going to tell us all about freedom. That's the theme of chapter 5. But tonight, I'm not going to go into next week's passage.

But I want to say this, that we're looking tonight at the summary of our important argument. and what it says is that God has this amazing plan, and that that is that he'll allow people from all nations, we don't have to be physical descendants of Isaac, as the Jews are, we can become from any nation, and we can become children of the free son of Abraham, part of that free family, by grace, through faith, faith.

And that's quite a striking thought, because I guess quite a lot of our friends think that we haven't really chosen freedom, we've chosen some sort of slavery. That's the way they look at us, they think we're, Christianity doesn't necessarily spell freedom, freedom, but that's, it does spell freedom.

There's a message here tonight that anyone can find freedom. Now freedom doesn't mean, as we'll find as we go on, that we can do whatever we like, but it does mean that we're free from the terrible treadmill of working to find acceptance with God.

means that we're free in the sense that all our debts have been paid for. We're no longer trying to climb up towards God, find acceptance with him.

[20 : 38] We can be set free by a gift of grace received by faith. And that is the glorious story told in quite a complicated way.

And if you've got any questions, you can come and ask me afterwards, and I'll try and do better than I've done so far at talking about a difficult passage. But if you want to come and ask me more questions, in the end I got excited, and I hope that you have too.

Now, well, wait till the end of the service, you can go and phone your mothers, and you can tell them about the gift of freedom that you've received, and how exciting it all is.

So let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for it when it's easy and when it's difficult.

We thank you that you speak today as you have always spoken. Thank you, Lord, for freedom. Thank you that we're not compelled forever to be trying to find our way to God because Jesus, but that you have come down to us in Jesus.

[21 : 49] and opened the door and opened the way and given us freedom from sin and law and wrath.

And tonight we just sit or stand in your presence with great joy, being glad, breaking forth and crying aloud.

Thank you, Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.