

Congregation,

Before any one gets up and leaves this morning, I want to indulge in a little bit of allegory. I know that in reformed circles we frown at that, and I would too usually, but because we find it in our text, I hope it will be useful to you. As we know Paul has been speaking throughout Galatians about the futility of thinking that we can somehow attain our salvation through works of obedience to the law of Moses. Our salvation is found in Christ alone. To add further weight to his argument, he uses some allegory, turning to history and speaking about two mothers, two sons, two covenants and two cities.

One mother is from Mount Sinai. She is Hagar, Abraham and Sarah's maid servant. Paul presents Hagar as Mount Sinai in Arabia where the Law of Moses was given. Further, Paul says that Hagar and her children, corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she and her children are in slavery to the Law. The other mother is Sarah. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, is free and her children are free, born under the covenant of grace, represented by the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:24-26).

So for Paul, the slaves are those who believe obedience to the Law of Moses will make them right with God. Whereas, the free are those who trust in Christ alone because they live by faith. So free in Christ or slaves to the law. When Paul set up the churches in Galatia, he preached salvation through the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus alone. But soon after, a group of Jewish-Christian missionaries arrived in Galatia to "correct" Paul's gospel.

The Judaizers preached a legalistic form of Christianity. They were trying to add the law of Moses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. As a result, some of the new Gentile Christians in Galatia thought they had to become circumcised and that it was mandatory to celebrate Passover and other Jewish festivals. However, Paul points out that in their effort to prove that they were good Christians, they were actually becoming enslaved again to all kinds of Old Testament rituals.

Now before we become too critical of the new Gentile Christians, even today Christians are inclined to reduce faith in Christ to a list of rules or traditions. Some people tend to evaluate our spiritual standing by what we do for God, rather than by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It's an ever present danger. And so Paul begins his argument in verse 21 by taking an example from the book of Genesis, particular Abraham's wife Sarah and Hagar, the maid servant.

For the Jews, Abraham was their hero. They believed since Abraham was circumcised, so should all Christians be if they wish to be proper Christians. The apostle Paul met this challenge head-on by mentioning the historical situation vv 22-23. God had promised to make Abraham a great nation, but for a long time that promise remained unfulfilled.

He was old and his wife Sarah was barren, and neither were getting any younger. When God made the initial promise of a son, Abraham was in his eighties and poor Sarah, who had probably prayed for a baby for years had remained childless. And we know the story. In desperation she said to her husband, take Hagar and have children with her. (Gen. 16:2). And Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant conceived and gave birth to a son named Ishmael (Gen. 16:15).

But then, God again came and promised that they would have a son (Gen 17:15-16). And against all expectation, Sarah did conceive at the age of ninety and gave birth to a son named Isaac (Gen. 21:1-3). So both Ishmael and Isaac were sons of Abraham. They were both circumcised. They both grew up in the same home. Yet there were some crucial differences.

One difference was that they had different mothers, important in the eyes of the law. Ishmael's mother was a slave, so Ishmael is born a slave. Isaac, on the other hand, was born free, the heir of Sarah, a free woman. Another crucial difference was the way they were born. Ishmael "was born according to the flesh" (Gal. 4:23). When Abraham got Hagar pregnant, he was operating on the principle that "God helps those who help themselves."

However, Isaac was not born "according to the flesh." Isaac, was a gift from God. Isaac's conception and birth itself was ordinary enough, but the circumstances surrounding his conception were extraordinary. He was "born through promise" (Gal. 4:23), or "according to the Spirit" (Gal. 4:29). Isaac's birth was the result of God's supernatural intervention. When God promised Sarah a son, she thought it was just about the funniest thing she had ever heard for she had already been through menopause and they were old.

Yet, God was faithful to his promise. Through the supernatural work of his Spirit, Abraham and Sarah produced a child born by God's promise. So one son came by works; the other came by faith. One was a slave; the other was free.

Now this is all ancient history, but the apostle Paul discovered an even deeper meaning at work. He took the historical situation and gave specific people, places, and events some spiritual meaning. In the eyes of God, everyone is either an Ishmael or an Isaac. To understand what Isaac and Ishmael represent, it helps to start with their mothers. These women are two covenants. One is a covenant of works by law, which leads to slavery; the other is a covenant of grace in Christ which leads to freedom (Gal. 4:24–26).

Hagar represents the covenant of works, attributed to the present, earthly Jerusalem, to those who believe the law saves. The punch line is actually v25. “Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children” (Gal. 4:25). Hagar was the perfect woman to represent the old covenant which meant slavery to the law, for she herself was a slave. Furthermore, all of her children were slaves like Ishmael. So anyone who is still in bondage to legalism is one of Hagar’s spiritual children. Anyone who reduces Christianity to a list of “dos and don’ts” is a slave like Ishmael.

Jerusalem stands for God’s people. Here it refers to the Jews and to the Judaism of Paul’s day—the institution of Jewish religion. Adding the law to be saved. And when Paul said that Jerusalem corresponded to Hagar, he was saying, that even though they were Jews, they were really Ishmaelite’s, spiritually speaking! That was like a red rag at a bull. Paul wasn’t all that winsome for he just managed to call a Jew a Gentile. And the Judaizers prided themselves on being the true sons of Abraham.

Paul admitted that they were children of Abraham, but he said that they were spiritually illegitimate because they giving up the freedom the gospel gave them to becoming slaves. By adding the law, they were sons of Hagar rather than children of Sarah. All those who trust in works salvation are never free, and never can be. Even if you and I could keep all God’s law, we should have no right to His favour; for we would have done no more than was our duty, and therefore would still be slaves.

The law never gives you a “thank you” but continues to demand more. You can never say you are done! When we were in Foxton, we lived right opposite the race track. And we often walked past where they trained horses. And one such guy had this rotary thing where they tied the horse too and it just went round and round to give the horse its proper exercise. Trying to earn salvation by obedience to the law is a little like that. Just keep working at it. You can even run if you like, but you can’t stop and take a breather. That’s slavery, in bondage to the law.

Now, by direct contrast, Sarah never was a slave. Abraham’s wife was free and the son born to her by promise was Isaac, who was also free. Sarah represents the new covenant, which is not a covenant of law, but of promise or if you will the covenant of grace, attributed to those who believe Christ alone saves. These people are referred to as belonging to the heavenly city of Jerusalem.

In the new covenant, God does not say “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not.” Instead he says, “I will be your God. I will redeem you from your sins. I will give you the free gift of eternal life through the death and resurrection of my Son, Jesus Christ. The new covenant aligns with the Jerusalem above which is free, and she is our mother (Gal. 4:26). Paul is referring to the church of Jesus Christ.

The New Jerusalem is not just for the future, but also for the here and now. God has already started to build his eternal city. The “new” Jerusalem has replaced the “now” Jerusalem, the spiritual Jerusalem has superseded the earthly Jerusalem. Bottom line, anyone who trusts in Jesus as Saviour and Lord is a son or daughter of Sarah, a true child of Abraham. If we belong to God’s family in this way, we are free in Christ.

We are citizens of the ‘new’ Jerusalem and enjoy the freedom of that eternal city. Those who try to justify themselves by keeping the law are the slave children of Hagar, but those who are justified by faith in Christ are God’s free sons and daughters. Whenever Paul thought about the joy of freedom in Christ, he burst into song, as he does here v27; It’s a quotation from Isaiah 54:1.

This quotation from Isaiah is doubly appropriate because it relates to both Sarah and Jerusalem. The connection with Sarah is obvious. She was a barren woman whom God blessed with a joyous multitude of sons and daughters. When Isaiah prophesied about the barren woman, however, he was not thinking primarily of Sarah, but of the city of Jerusalem. The “now” Jerusalem of his day was barren because her children had been carried away into exile. But Isaiah promised that one-day God would establish a “new” Jerusalem, which would be filled with far more children than the old Jerusalem could ever contain. Isaiah’s happy promise is being fulfilled at this very moment, not in an earthly city, but in a spiritual

one that spreads across the globe. As men, women, and children come to faith in Jesus Christ, they become citizens of the New Jerusalem, to the praise and glory of God.

So we have two mothers, two sons, two covenants, and two cities. The question is, to which of these two do you belong? It is not enough to claim Abraham as our father, as the Judaizers did, because Abraham had two sons, and only one of them was free.

So, the more crucial question, who was your mother? Paul wanted the Galatians to see that by the promise of God, they were free sons and daughters of Sarah (v28). In other words, it was the promise of the gospel, the promise of the coming Christ, the promise of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Paul called the Galatians “brothers” because they were the children of that promise. In Christ Jesus, both Jew and Gentile who believed were all sons of God, through faith (Gal. 3:26). The true children of Abraham are the ones who belong to Christ.

Now one further implication of belonging to God’s family is that we are likely to get persecuted as v29 speaks about. The two sons of Abraham were rivals. When Abraham threw a party after Isaac was weaned, Ishmael mocked Isaac (Gen. 21:8–9). Ishmael, was treating Isaac him with contempt.

Paul’s point was that Christians should expect exactly the same kind of treatment that Isaac received from his big brother (Gal. 4:29). In fact, it was already happening in Galatia. The Jews (sons of Hagar) were persecuting Christians (the sons of Sarah). Persecution is one way to tell the difference between true and false religion. It is the false religion that always does the persecuting.

So whenever people who claim to be religious start to oppress minorities, even if they do it in the name of Jesus, we can be sure they do not represent true Christians. Often, the most serious persecution comes from people who claim to be religious. Martin Luther said, “If someone does not want to endure persecution from Ishmael, let him not claim that he is Christian.”

One reason Christians are willing to be disliked, or even persecuted, is because they know what their heavenly Father has promised them in Christ, an eternal inheritance of infinite delight. The sons of Ishmael have no such inheritance. God blessed Ishmael in many ways, but he never gave him the promise of salvation, which was only for Isaac.

It was right for the slave to be cast out because God’s promise of saving grace was only for Isaac. When Paul quoted Sarah’s words, it was a not-too-subtle way of saying that the Galatian Christians needed to drive the Judaizers and their legalism right out of the church.

If salvation comes by grace, then the church cannot tolerate salvation by works. In fact, nor can it remain in our hearts. We’re sons of Sarah, free in Christ, not sons of Hagar. In Christ we are free. All other religions—such as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Mormonism—are all slave religions. And any form of Christianity that adds works is no better! What God has done in Jesus Christ is offer his free salvation to everyone who trusts in him.

If we are working to gain God’s acceptance, we need to realize that we are still in spiritual slavery. If we want to be free, we need to ask God for the gift of his grace. Then we will be able to join with all his sons and daughters in saying, “We are not children of the slave but of the free woman” (Gal. 4:31). Don’t live like an Ishmael – rather live as free people in Christ for that is what you are and rejoice in it! Amen.