

“Slavery”

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Galatians 4:21–31 (ESV)

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²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴ Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷ For it is written,

*“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than those of the one who has a husband.”*

²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” ³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.¹

Did any of you fill out an application before you were born? No? You didn’t have to fill out an application that said, “Why should you we be your parents? List your credentials and significant accomplishments. Write a one-page essay indicating your goals for and philosophy of, life. Please also include all official transcripts.” Okay, that’s an absurd thought, isn’t it? There’s nothing that we do that can merit our being born. We don’t determine when and where and to whom we are born. We don’t earn the right to be born, or the right to have certain parents. And hopefully no parents would ever think that our worth as sons and daughters would be based on what we have accomplished or could ever hope to accomplish in the future.

Now imagine that you’re six years old and your parents come up to you and say, “Mommy and I are trying to figure out if we want to keep you. We’re going to write down a list of all the times you obeyed us, and then we’re going to write down a list of all the times you

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

disobeyed us. If your list of good deeds is longer than your list of bad ones, we'll keep you." Would that make you feel loved and accepted? Would you feel like a real member of the family?

If you were part of a family because you did more good things than bad, or if you were disowned because you did more bad things than good, how would that feel? I think you'd feel like you were an employee at a job, and not a member of a loving family. You wouldn't feel safe. You wouldn't feel secure. After all, you'd be only a few mistakes away from getting kicked out. You might feel like a slave. A slave to the rules. A slave to your performance.

Pretty much every religion functions that way. If you do good things, you get a reward. You're in. And if you do bad things, you're out. If you only do the right things, and keep doing the right things, you are acceptable to God, and you receive all the benefits that come with a relationship with him. But if you don't do certain things, or jump through the right hoops, you're out.

Christianity, however, is something very different. We've seen that over the last couple of months as we've looked at the book of Galatians. In this book, Paul wants a group of Christians in modern-day Turkey to know what the true gospel is. The gospel simply means "good news." It's the core message of Christianity, that we are put into a right relationship with God not through the will of man, but through the will of God. We are rescued from this evil age not because we've been good, but because God is good. More specifically, we can be God's children not because we've earned it, but because God's Son died for our sins, taking on the curse that those sins deserve when he died on the cross.

Paul tells us that Christians are adopted children of God (4:1-7) and children of Abraham (3:7, 29). That means that we are part of God's family and part of God's people. And Christians are adopted by God not on the basis of anything they've done. Instead, God decided to bring us into his family. And we are able to have a right relationship with God because we are regarded as his Son, Jesus. We are credited with his perfection because we are united to him by faith and through the Holy Spirit.

In the passage that we're looking at today, Galatians 4:21-31, Paul wants the Galatians—and us—to know that we are children of God because of his promise, not because of human striving. We are free, not slaves. We are associated with the city of God, not the city of man. We are born not of the flesh, but of the Spirit. Paul contrasts two sons: Isaac and Ishmael. Both of them were children of Abraham, but only of them was a child of promise. Only one of them

received a blessing and an inheritance from God. Only one of them was included among God's people. Only one of them had a supernatural birth.

Now, in order to make sense of this passage, we have to look back once again to the Old Testament. Paul has already discussed Abraham in Galatians 3. Abraham was the father of Israel. All of Israel can trace its roots back to this one man. When God called Abraham, God told him, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3). God called Abraham when he was seventy-five years old (Gen. 12:4).

In order for God to make a great nation out of Abraham, Abraham had to have children. But he was an old man with an old wife, Sarah. And not only was she past child-bearing age, she had previously been unable to have children (Gen. 11:30). Yet still God promised Abraham his very own son, his own heir (Gen. 15:4). God made a covenant with Abraham, letting him know that he would make good on this promise. And Abraham trusted God, and his trust was counted to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6; Gal. 3:6).

Yet in the very next chapter of the Bible, Genesis 16, we read this:

¹ Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ² And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. ⁴ And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived (Gen. 16:1-4a).

¹⁵ And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram (Gen. 16:15-16).

What happened here? It seems that Sarah—here known as Sarai—thought it was impossible for her and Abraham to have a child, since they were so old. So she told Abraham—who was still known as Abram at this point—to take her servant for a wife so that the two of them could produce a child. And Hagar, the Egyptian servant, had a son named Ishmael.

Often in Genesis, there's very little commentary about the significance of events. But the point is that Abraham and Sarah didn't trust God. They didn't believe he could supernaturally

give them a son. So they decided to make their own plans to get one. This passage shows that Abraham, the man of faith, was not perfect, just as no Christian today is perfect. We can still disobey even after we have faith. And this passage also reminds me a bit of Adam and Eve. They didn't trust that God's word was good, and in that case, Eve led Adam astray.

Yet God carried out his plan. He told Abraham, when he was ninety-nine, that in a year Sarah would give birth to a son. God said, "I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Gen. 17:16). At that point, Abraham did what most of us would do. He laughed and said, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen. 17:17) And Sarah laughed, too (Gen. 18:12). They laughed because it's preposterous to think that such an old woman could have a child. And that's the point. It is impossible for them to have their own child. Impossible. Unless God does it. Unless the God who made the universe out of nothing, the God who can control the weather and bring the dead back to life, causes a ninety-year-old woman to become pregnant.² And God fulfilled his promise: Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac, whose name means "he laughs." And Isaac fathered Jacob, and Jacob fathered Judah, and out of the tribe of Judah came David, and eventually out of David's line came Jesus, the true offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3:16).

Paul mentions all of this in another letter, Romans. There, Paul says that Abraham believed God,

who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be."¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.²² That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:17b-22).

I mention all of this because that is what faith looks like. Faith is trusting that God can do the impossible. Faith is trusting that God can do what we cannot do. But sometimes we don't trust God. Sometimes we think we can do what he can do. So Sarah thought that she could force

² See Rom. 4:13-25 for the connection between God's promise, God doing the impossible (giving life to the dead and calling things into existence that don't exist), faith, and justification.

the issue by having Abraham impregnate Hagar. And sometimes we think that we can save ourselves through our obedience. Sometimes we think we can be good enough to earn God's favor.

That's what Paul is getting at in this passage. Let's look at verses 21-23:

²¹ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?
²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Paul had taught the Galatians the true gospel, that we are reconciled to God through our faith, not through our doing of the law given to Israel in the Old Testament. But false teachers had come to the Galatians and told them that in order to be saved from God's wrath, they had to obey the law. So Paul says, "You who want to be under the law, don't you know what it says?" When he uses "law" the second time, he is referring to the first five books of the Bible, sometimes called the Pentateuch. So, Paul is going back to the beginning of the Bible to make a point. Abraham had Ishmael through Hagar, a slave (Gen. 21:10), and Isaac through Sarah, a "free" woman. Ishmael was born according to the flesh. That means that his conception was the product of human initiative. But Isaac was the promised child, the child born because God did what was impossible.

Then Paul identifies Ishmael and Isaac with different realities. We see this in verses 24-27:

²⁴ Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

²⁷ For it is written,

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than those of the one who has a husband."

Normally, an allegory is a fictional story where every element of the story—the characters, the setting, the plot—represents something in reality. Here, Paul is using the term a

bit more loosely. Obviously, Hagar and Sarah and their children were real people in history. But the story of Hagar and Sarah can also be viewed figuratively or symbolically. Paul wants to show that even in the Old Testament, there is a precedent for works versus faith. So Hagar is associated with Mount Sinai. That is where God gave Israel the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law. And the children of Hagar and that “old covenant” are slaves. This would have been shocking for Jewish people to hear. They had great respect for the law, and they would never have associated it with a slave woman from Egypt. Egypt was the land of the enemy! And Hagar and Ishmael were not God’s people!

But Paul is making his point very clear: the law doesn’t lead to promise. The law enslaves people. He doesn’t mean God’s commandments are bad. He means that if you try to find your righteousness in obeying the law, you won’t be free. You can never rest. You’ll never measure up.

Paul also points out that Sinai isn’t in the Promised Land. It was in the wilderness. It wasn’t in the land of inheritance. That’s another important point. The inheritance of a land—which points to the new creation—didn’t come through the law. The blessing and the promise come through Isaac and through faith, not through the law.

Paul goes further: he says that the current Jerusalem, the one on the map, is also associated with slavery and the children of Hagar. The present Jerusalem isn’t the city of God or the Holy Land. It’s a city of slavery.

But there’s another Jerusalem. It’s not the one on the map. It’s the new Jerusalem, as described in Revelation 21, or the heavenly Jerusalem, as the author of Hebrews describes it (12:22). It’s the true city of God, where he dwells. It’s the place he’s making now in heaven, the one that will come to earth at the last day (Rev. 21:2). Paul says that this Jerusalem is “our mother.” Now, this isn’t what Paul means. Paul doesn’t mean the church is our mother. That’s what the Catholic Church teaches. This is what it says in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Salvation comes from God alone; but because we receive the life of faith through the Church, she is our mother: “We believe the Church as the mother of our new birth, and not *in* the Church as if she were the author of our salvation.”³

³ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 46. The quotation is from Faustus of Riez, *De Spiritu Sancto* 1, 2: PL 62, 11.

What Paul is doing is referring back to Psalm 87. It talks about Zion, another name for Jerusalem. And it describes different countries—Israel’s enemies—being born there.

- ⁴ Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;
 behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush—
 “This one was born there,” they say.
⁵ And of Zion it shall be said,
 “This one and that one were born in her”;
 for the Most High himself will establish her.
⁶ The LORD records as he registers the peoples,
 “This one was born there.”

In other words, Gentiles are described as being found among God’s people. They are registered as being born in his city. They are among his people. This is important because it is part of the background of Galatians. One of the major questions in the early church was, How do Gentiles become part of God’s people? Prior to the time of Jesus, they had to convert to Judaism. Men had to be circumcised. All had to live as Jews, obeying the law. But now they only need to repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus.

That’s also why, in verse 27, Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1. In the book of Isaiah, the present Jerusalem, about 700 years before the time of Christ, was a city full of sin. But Isaiah looked forward to a time when Jerusalem would produce more “children” and when it would enlarge (54:1-3). He looked forward to a time when foreigners would come into the people of God and minister in his temple (56:3, 6-7). In fact, Isaiah looked forward to a time when the new heavens and earth would be the new Jerusalem (65:17-19).

I think Paul’s point, at least in part, is that to be part of God’s people, one must be born from “above” or “born again” as it says in John 3:3. To be part of God’s people, one must be supernaturally born. We can’t cause ourselves to be part of God’s people no more than we can cause ourselves to be born in the first place. As I said earlier, we didn’t decide where and when we would be born.

This is what John says of this at the beginning of his Gospel. He’s talking about Jesus.

¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:11-13).

Those who become children of God do so because it is God's will. It's not because we're born God's children ("not of blood"). It's not because of anything that we do ("will of the flesh"). It's because God chose us, God brought the gospel to us, God caused us to believe the gospel, and God is in the process of transforming us into new people.

Paul wanted the Galatians to see that the promise of God, all the blessings that are part of the promise, comes through faith, not through obedience to the law. We cannot tolerate any other view in the church. If we lose the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, we've lost the gospel, the message of Christianity.

This is what Paul writes in Galatians 4:28-31:

²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." ³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Paul says that Ishmael was born according to the flesh—in other words, he wasn't the product of God's work. And he persecuted Isaac, who was born of the Spirit. Isaac did have a supernatural conception (remember, his mother was ninety!), and this must have been the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul wants to contrast people who are truly God's people, who have been changed through the Holy Spirit, the third person of God, with those who aren't. And Ishmael persecuted Isaac. Paul's probably thinking of Genesis 21:9, where it says that Ishmael laughed, probably mocking Isaac. In the very next verse in Genesis (21:10), Sarah, the mother of Isaac, said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." In the Genesis story, Abraham makes Hagar and Ishmael leave them, and they go off into the wilderness.

I think Paul refers back to this story in Genesis for two reasons. One, he says that a pattern of persecution was established. Those who are children of the slave—in other words, Jews who didn't seek a relationship with God through faith, and who now have rejected Jesus—tend to persecute those who live by faith, the children of the free woman, so to speak. In the first century, there were times when Jews persecuted Christians. We see this in Acts and it's referred to in Revelation (2:9). And many legalists today still don't understand that our relationship with God comes through faith.

The second reason Paul says this is that people who believe they can earn a relationship with God, or keep a relationship with God, through their moral performance can't be part of the people of God. Why? Because that attitude ignores what God has revealed about our condition. Our sinful desires and our sinful deeds are worse than we imagined. We simply cannot be good enough to earn our way to God. Anyone who thinks they can earn God's favor simply doesn't understand how perfect God is and how imperfect we are.

That attitude is also selfish. It focuses on one's own performance all the time. It thinks of how a person can earn rewards, or what possible punishment a person will face. It does not focus on God. That kind of attitude doesn't view God as the reward. The gospel of grace, on the other hand, focuses on God. It sees God and his forgiveness as the only answer to one's problems. It sees that we are so hopeless that we need God to do the impossible. We need him to transform us. We need him to take on our sin and punish it so that he doesn't have to destroy us. We need him to do all the work. That kind of attitude, the one of faith, clings to God. It focuses on God: he is the only hope, he is the solution, he is the goal, he is the reward.

Salvation—being reconciled to God and rescued from our own sin and the punishment it deserves—is a gift from God. And it is supernatural. It is something that only God can do. We can't manufacture it. Only God could become a man and live a perfect life. Only God could take all our sin and nail it to the cross.

Now, I want to take a moment to contrast this message with the message of Islam, because this will illustrate how Christianity is so much different from other faiths. I think that's appropriate because, as you may know, Muslims claim that they can trace their roots back to Ishmael. Josephus, the Jewish historian, said this of Ishmael:

(220) When the lad was grown up, he married a wife, by birth an Egyptian, from whence the mother was herself derived originally. Of this wife were born to Ismael twelve sons. . . . (221) These inhabited all the country from Euphrates to the Red Sea, and called it Nabatene. They are an Arabian nation and name their tribes from these, both because of their own virtue and because of the dignity of Abraham their father.⁴

⁴ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.220-221, in Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987).

So Ishmael is the father of the Arabian people. The Qur'an calls him "an apostle (and) a prophet."⁵ And Islam started in Arabia in the beginning of the seventh century, about 2500 years after Abraham and six hundred years after Jesus.

Islam is different from Christianity in many ways, especially as it concerns salvation. First, Islam doesn't have the same view of sin. Islam doesn't believe we have a fallen nature. But Christianity says that we are all born with the power of sin in us. We have sinful desires. It's part of our nature from the beginning. Therefore, we desperately need to be rescued by God. Second, Islam doesn't teach that the purpose of life is to have a relationship with God. The authors of a book called *Answering Islam* write, "It is generally agreed that according to orthodox Islam, the purpose of man is not to know God and become more conformed to his character, but to understand his will and become more obedient to his commands."⁶ But the whole point of Christianity is a relationship with God. God is the goal of life and the reward for his people. Third, Islam doesn't teach that people need a radical, supernatural conversion. But Christianity says that without this supernatural conversion, we can't love God and obey him. Fourth, Islam teaches that one must have faith and do good deeds in order to be in Paradise one day.⁷ One must believe in Allah and his attributes, the testimony of the prophets, particularly Muhammad, and the afterlife. And one must do good deeds, including the five pillars of Islam: the confession that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is his prophet; ritual prayers, made five times a day; fasting, including fasting during the day for the month of Ramadan; almsgiving; and making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Qur'an talks about weighing good deeds with scales. We find passages like this in the Qur'an:

We shall set up scales of justice for the Day of Judgment, so that not a soul will be dealt with unjustly in the least (Surah 21:47).

102. Then those whose balance (of good deeds) is heavy—they will attain salvation:

103. But those whose balance is light, will be those who have lost their souls, in Hell will they abide (Surah 23:102-103).

⁵ Surah 19:54. Ali, Abdullah Yusuf, trans. "The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an," 2004. All quotations of the Qur'an are taken from this translation.

⁶ Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 49.

⁷ See Surah 18:107: "As to those who believe and work righteous deeds, they have, for their entertainment, the Gardens of Paradise."

So though there are some passages that talk about Allah’s forgiveness and grace, it seems that one’s salvation depends on what that person does. But Christianity, as we have clearly seen, says we can’t earn a relationship with God. On our own, we can never be good enough.

Yet here’s a fifth difference between Islam and Christianity: in Islam, there is no assurance of salvation.⁸ A Muslim can never really know if he or she has tipped those scales in a favorable direction. The only way to know is if one engages in *jihad*. Those who have suffered for Allah will have their iniquities blotted out (Surah 3:195). Christianity says that if you know God, you can be assured that you will be with him forever. There’s nothing you can do that will separate you from the love of God if you are in Christ Jesus.

Now, does that religion that I have described, Islam, sound like freedom? Does it sound like being a child of God? “You can stay in the family as long as you do enough good deeds.” It sounds enslaving. You must submit to Allah or else. And you would never know if you had secured salvation, which could lead to great anxiety.

One of the main reasons why Christianity is so different from Islam or any other religion is that God took the penalty for our sins against him. This is the reason why we can trust that once we have a real relationship with Jesus, when we trust him for everything, we will never be separated from him. Islam teaches that there is no atonement. No one can die for your sins.⁹ But Christianity says that God became man and died for the sins of his people. Since God is eternal and infinite, his death can cover any sin and it can cover those sins forever. When Jesus died on the cross, he was cast out so that we don’t have to be cast out. Though he is the true Son of God, he took on his Father’s punishment for sin so that we can become children of God.

No amount of going to church, no amount of praying, no special prayer, no amount of giving to the poor—none of this will save you. But if you put your trust in Jesus, and if you come to him and say something like this, “I can’t do it. There’s nothing I can do to save myself. Please save me,” he will save you. Those aren’t magic words. There are no magic words. There are no magic rituals. Salvation is a change of the heart and of the mind. If you realize how needy you are, and if you realize who Jesus is and what he did, and if you put your trust in him, you can be assured that you will be with him forever. And that frees you from focusing on yourself and your deeds—whether it’s your sin or your good deeds—and frees you to focus on God and on others.

⁸ Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 128.

⁹ Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 271. See Surah 53:38.

So let us live like children of promise. Let's never think that we can earn something from God because we have done good deeds. And let us not treat others that way. We need to communicate clearly that the good news of Christianity is that God has done what we can't. That's why it's a gospel of grace. It's all about God giving us his favor even though we don't deserve it, and even though he didn't have to give it.