

Grace to the Barren Gal 4:21-31

Tim Anderson 28/7/2019

Today's passage in Galatians is a difficult one.

It's difficult for a number of reasons.

#1. This passage references a story in the Old Testament that many of us are not too familiar with.

It is very hard to understand the NT without understanding the OT.

The writers of the NT often presume

that we know what they are talking about when they refer to the OT.

Why? Because the OT is God's Word

so of course you would familiarise yourself with it.

You would, wouldn't you?

Unfortunately, all too often to our shame we haven't.

#2. This passage uses the OT passage as an allegory.

That means as a symbolic picture to illustrate a point.

And we don't tend to use allegories to communicate today.

So it seems quite unfamiliar to us.

It's a little bit strange to many ears.

#3. This OT story evokes our sympathy for Hagar.

We Australians are champions of the underdog.

And quite frankly we don't like the thought of Hagar being driven out.

But in the way Paul is using the story,

Sarah is the character we are called to identify with.

And Sarah behaves in quite a mean spirited way in the story.

And so it doesn't sit comfortably with us.

What should we say about those difficulties?

Well because this story is being used as an allegory,

Paul is telling us something about God and God's promises.

He's not trying to justify Sarah's behaviour.

What we need to do is understand Paul's illustration,

and put our feelings about what happened in Genesis to one side.

So let me tell you the story of what happened in Genesis,

just in case your memory of the story of Abraham and his family is a bit faint.

And then we'll get to how Paul uses that story to tell us something about the wonderful freedom we have in Christ.

So God made a promise to Abraham.

He pointed him to the host of stars in the night sky and said, your descendents will be like that.

But there was a problem.

Abraham was old 86, years old, and his wife Sarah was 76 years old.

Too old humanly speaking to have kids.

And they had no kids.

So how was God's promise to Abraham going to be fulfilled?

Well Sarah came up with a bright idea.

Why don't you sleep with my slave girl.

She can have a child and God's promise to you can be fulfilled.

Now we think about that and find the sexual immorality confronting.

But it was in fact pretty normal in that era

if you couldn't have kids

to have a child through a slave and raise it as your own.

It wouldn't have raised an eyebrow amongst Abraham's contemporaries.

And Hagar gave birth to Abraham's son Ishmael.

But what raised God's eyebrow, metaphorically of course,

is that he'd given a promise to Abraham,

and instead of trusting God to fulfil his promise,

Abraham had taken matters into his own hands.

Abraham had decided to fulfil God's promise himself.

And so God appeared to Abraham

and told him that he would have a child by his wife Sarah.

And when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90,

Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

When Isaac was a toddler,

Abraham threw a party to celebrate his son, Isaac.

Ishmael would have been maybe 16 or 17 by this time.

And he clearly objected to being upstaged

and made some nasty comments about Isaac.
Sarah, took offense and wanted to get rid of Hagar and her son -
to send them away.
Abraham initially wanted to keep them,
because Ishmael was after all his son.
But God told him,
"Don't worry,
send them away,
because your offspring will be reckoned through Isaac."

That's the story.
So what does Paul want to teach us from that story?
He begins, 4:21,
"Tell me you who want to be under the law,
are you not aware of what the law says?"
And that might strike us as a bit strange.
We are used to thinking about rules and regulations as the Law.
But this is not the ten commandments,
this is the story of Abraham sending away Hagar and Ishmael.
But in fact, the whole of the first five books of the Bible
are called the Law,
and sometimes the whole OT is called the Law.
And God expected his people
to use all of the Scriptures to shape their lives before him.

Paul continues, 4:22,
"For it is written that Abraham had two sons,
one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman."
He doesn't name the two women at this stage
and indeed he doesn't name Sarah at all in the passage.
The key thing for the illustration
is that one is free and the other is a slave.
And remember this is all about the illustration.
And the illustration is about our Christian freedom.

Paul continues, 4:23,

"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."
Ishmael was born because Abraham tried to take God's promise
and make it happen by his own actions.

Isaac was born simply because God made it happen.

And that has a parallel with the two ways to try to access salvation
that Paul has been contrasting.

You can try to access salvation by your own efforts.

Or you can try to access salvation through trusting in God's promise.

The first way doesn't work!

Abraham accessed God's blessing by trusting in his promise.

The point of these things is not about Isaac and Ishmael.

No as Paul says in 4:24

"These things are being taken figuratively."

There are two ways to relate to God being contrasted.

On one hand you have the old covenant.

The old covenant was given to Moses on Mt Sinai.

It represents anyone

who tries to relate to God on the basis of their works.

And the result of relying on your works is slavery.

Hagar and her children are slaves.

But the other way of relating to God is through the new covenant.

The new covenant comes through Jesus.

And all who put their faith in Jesus

are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

We relate to God on the basis of our faith in his promises.

And the result of relying on Jesus is freedom.

Sarah and her children are free.

Now if you've been at church over the last six weeks or so,
you might well be thinking to yourself,

"Paul has already made this before in Galatians."

Way back in 2:4, Paul had already said,

"This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves."

It's not like Paul hasn't already made the point that putting yourself under the Law is slavery, and faith in Jesus Christ is freedom.

So why do we need this extended metaphor about Hagar and Sarah? Well I think the point is to make the claim that Christians are the true children of Abraham, the true Jews.

Can you imagine how the people who were trying to get the Galatians to observe the Law would have felt about being compared to Hagar's children? Hagar's descendents are the Arabs, right?

Ishmael is the father of the Arabs.

A conscientious Law observing Jew is not going to be too pleased if you tell him he's an Arab, is he? And of course in our current context we could add, that a strictly observant Muslim is not going to be too pleased if you call him a Jew either.

Though that has nothing to do with Paul's metaphor.

What Paul is saying is that Christians are the true children of Abraham - the children according to the promise, the descendents of Isaac.

Those who follow the Law -

Yes they are descendents of Abraham.

But only by their lineage.

Not by the promise of God.

They have excluded themselves from participating in God's promises.

And in making this point,

Paul is actually following the Lord Jesus.

In Jn 8:33, some Pharisees said to Jesus,

"We are Abraham's descendents and have never been slaves of anyone.

How can you say we shall be set free?"

And then a little further on,
"Abraham is our father."
"If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus,
then you would do what Abraham did."
So Jesus is not beyond questioning
whether the Jews are actually Abraham's children.

Paul also does it in Rom 2:28-29
"A person is not a Jew who is only one outwardly,
nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.
No a person is a Jew who is one inwardly;
and circumcision is circumcision of the heart,
by the Spirit, not by the written code."

Jesus and Paul consistently say that the true descendents of Abraham
are those who have the faith of Abraham.

And so the Galatians who are hearing this can say,
"Yes I am a true child of Abraham."

They'd been doubting their standing before God.
They'd been thinking maybe they needed to come under the Law.
But no.

Coming under the Law makes you a slave like Hagar's children.
Relying on Jesus through faith is how you find freedom.

Now what about us?

No one is pressuring us to come under the Jewish Law.
Apart from underlining our freedom in Christ,
what does this passage have to say to us?

Well here's something you might not be super happy to hear,
but it's true, so we need to face the truth honestly.

4:29 tells us that we will face persecution.

"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."

The Galatians were facing persecution
from those who were putting themselves under the Law.
And we too can expect to face persecution
from those who try to earn their salvation by works.
This year the British Government through its foreign secretary,
Jeremy Hunt (what we would call the foreign minister)
commissioned a report on religious persecution.
It found that 80% of people worldwide
who experience persecution for their faith are Christians.
Christians make up perhaps 1/5 of the world's population,
but we make up 4/5 of those who are persecuted.
That's not to say people of other religions or no religion at all
don't get persecuted, clearly sometimes they do.
That's not to say
that Christians are never the ones dishing out religious persecution,
clearly sometimes we are,
and there are terrible examples across history.
But what it does say is that we are predominantly on the receiving end.

Why is that?

Because those who strive to earn their righteousness before God
are often quite insecure in their own minds.

Am I good enough?

I do all these works, will they make me acceptable.

And that insecurity sometimes shows itself

by their wanting to lash out

at those who don't feel the need to do the works they do.

Whereas the true Christian,

who knows that they are saved only by God's kindness,

has no desire to persecute anyone.

When we see someone who isn't following the teaching of Jesus,

we ought to think to ourselves,

that's where I would be

if God in his kindness hadn't called me out of darkness.

And so we feel sympathy for them, not hostility towards them.

How is it that some Christians do persecute others then?

Well when it happens,
it means they don't understand their faith properly.

The people who went on crusades
to liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims 1000 years ago.
They should have understood
that the earthly city of Jerusalem is not our home.

4:25-26

Hagar, the slave woman, corresponds to the earthly city of Jerusalem.
Our citizenship is in the Jerusalem that is above.

She is our mother.

And no one can take possession of her
aside from those God brings into his heavenly kingdom.

We have nothing to feel insecure about,
and so we have no reason to be defensive.

Sadly, the persecution of Christians
doesn't only come from those outside the church.

The Galatians were being persecuted
by Christian teachers within the church.

They were Christian teachers putting out a false gospel.

But they didn't wear a sign around their neck saying,
'hello, I preach a false gospel'.

To anyone looking at the church,
they just looked like Christian teachers.

And so it has been in the history of the church.

John Wesley, the great 18th century preacher
was forced to preach in the open fields,
because the church wouldn't let him use the church buildings.

He was an ordained Church of England minister.

But he was rejected by the church establishment.

Charles Simeon, the great 19th century English preacher,
was locked out of his own parish by his church wardens,
so he couldn't run an evening service.

(Don't get any ideas please, church wardens.)

And so it is today,
when you look at churches being persecuted,
in some places it is outsiders.
The Anglican church in Nigeria
faces violent persecution from Muslims.
But in other places, like USA, Canada, and New Zealand,
faithful congregations are getting thrown out of their churches
by the hierarchy of the church.

4:29

"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."

There's another thing this passage has to say to us.

4:30

"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."

Now we need to put aside the understandable compassion
that we feel for Hagar and Ishmael.

In the story they were treated harshly.

But God reassured Abraham

that he would make a great nation of Ishmael.

However, for the purposes of the illustration,

this tells us that it is Christians who are inheritors of God's kingdom.

Christians only.

The slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance.

Those who try to work for their salvation

will not be a part of the kingdom of God.

God's kingdom only comes to those who receive the free gift by faith.

That means when we face persecution,
we can do it with confident trust
that God is bringing us into his kingdom.

We are despised and rejected by people;
yet we are children of God;
and if children, then heirs;
heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.
That's Rom 8:17.

Sometimes people say that talk of the heavenly rewards that await us
as 'pie in the sky when you die'.

That is to say it is some carrot dangled in front of you,
with no particular relevance in this world.

And the implication is that this world is what we should care about.

But actually our heavenly reward is what gives us the security
to endure suffering on this earth for the sake of the gospel.

And our heavenly reward itself is going to endure for eternity.

You are a child of the free woman.

Your citizenship is in the Jerusalem that is above.

Let's take a moment to ponder how wonderful that is.

It's too easy for it to slip off the tongue.

You are a child of the free woman.

Your citizenship is in the Jerusalem that is above.