



THE FACE OF FREEDOM: BORN IN ZION

SERIES: GALATIANS: JOURNEY FROM LAW TO FREEDOM

Galatians 4:21–5:1

7th Message

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The Old City of Jerusalem is divided into four quarters: Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Armenian. Here Jews, Christians and Muslims eat, work and pray in close proximity to each other. Jerusalem is sacred to the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Old City is a wonderful place to visit, but the air is often thick with tension. The uneasy peace is frequently broken by conflict, as has happened yet again in recent weeks.

The cause of much of this conflict is prayer: who can pray where? The focal point of this conflict is the space known by Jews as *Har ha-bayit*, the Temple Mount, and by Muslims as *Haram esh-Sharif*, the Noble Sanctuary. This 37-acre compound is probably the most volatile and contested piece of real estate in the world. Here used to stand first Solomon's temple of the Old Testament, and then Herod's temple of the New Testament. Now the site houses the el-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Fifty years ago Israel captured the Old City including the Temple Mount, but immediately returned the latter to Muslim jurisdiction. The Noble Sanctuary is the third holiest site in Islam. Every Friday thousands of Muslims stream here for noon prayers. But two weeks ago Israel installed metal detectors at the entrances. Muslims refused to enter, and instead prayed in the streets outside under the watchful gaze of heavily-armed Israeli troops.

Meanwhile, Jews pray at the Western Wall, part of the retaining wall of the Temple Mount. After it was captured fifty years ago, the area in front of the wall was turned into an open-air synagogue. Prayer here is also controversial. Just a few weeks ago the Israeli government suspended its plan to allow men and women to pray together at the wall. What the Jews really want is to pray on top of the wall, on the Temple Mount itself, which used to be the temple courtyard. An increasing number of Jews have been forcing their way onto the compound to do just that, further intensifying the tension.

What about the Christians? Where do they pray? The Christian Quarter has many churches, notably the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. But in the recent disturbance, one Palestinian Christian showed solidarity by joining the Muslims in the street in prayer, with his Bible in hand and a cross around his neck.

Jews, Christians, Muslims, adherents of the three monotheistic faiths, the three Abrahamic faiths. All claim Abraham as their ancestral father. But they have different mothers. Jews are descended from Isaac, born to Sarah. Arabs are descended from Ishmael, born to Hagar. Muhammad is descended from Ishmael's second son. Isaac and Ishmael are not twin sons of different mothers! Though they are half-brothers, they have usually been enemies, from the time when Ishmaelites sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt to Geshem the Arab's opposition to Nehemiah. Again, what about the Christians? What is their connection to Abraham? Who is their ancestral mother?

Physically, Arab Christians may have Hagar's blood, but who is their spiritual mother? Who is our ancestral mother?

Jews, Christians, Muslims, all praying within the same small area. Do they pray to the same God? Each acknowledges one God. Each recites his creed. The Jewish *Shema*: Hear O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one (Deut 4:6). The Christian Creed: I believe in one God, Father Almighty. The Muslim *Shahadah*: There is no God but Allah. Do they pray to the same God?

Abraham and Jerusalem are of great importance to all three Abrahamic faiths. Abraham and his offspring have been a dominant theme of Galatians chapters 3–4. Today we come to the final section of these two chapters. Paul now throws Jerusalem into the mix also. What is the status of the children of Abraham? And where is the true Jerusalem?

At the heart of his letter to the young churches in Galatia, Paul devotes two dense chapters to instructing the new Christians about their identity. Many of these young believers are Gentiles, who have turned from their enslavement to the elementary principles. Formerly they were “enslaved to those that by nature are not gods” (4:8). Now they “have come to know God, or rather to be known by God” (4:9). They now know the true God through the Lord Jesus Christ, and have been filled with his Spirit. But Jewish teachers have come from Jerusalem to teach them that they must also become Jews, taking on all the Jewish identity markers, notably observance of the Law (Torah). And Jewish believers must continue to keep Torah. Jesus is not enough. They need Jesus plus the Law. But Paul will have none of it! This is to trade one enslavement for another, enslavement to the elementary principles for enslavement to the law. Paul is upset that the Galatian Christians are listening to these teachers: “I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you” (4:20).

Having already posed several rhetorical questions in chapters 3–4, Paul now poses another one:

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? (Gal 4:21 ESV)

Paul has questioned the motives of the Judaizers: “They make much of you...that you may make much of them” (4:17). The believers are yielding to this attention from the false-teachers: “you who desire to be under the law.” But don't they realize what the law actually says? By “the law” Paul here means the whole of the Torah, from Genesis to Deuteronomy, including its narrative sections. He will now give them a little lesson in what the Torah actually says.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. (4:22–23)

This is a very terse summary of a major portion of Abraham's life. It is "fraught with background." It is obvious that Paul expects the Galatians to know the story of the slave woman and the free woman. Quite possibly this is because the false teachers have already been using this story to persuade the Christians of their need to become Jews, true sons of Abraham. In former days one could assume that Christians knew their Old Testament well enough to fill in all the blanks, to fill in the whole picture from such a brief summary. Let me summarize the narrative arc of Abraham's life concerning the birth of these two sons (Gen 12-21).

The Lord called Abram to go from his country to a new land, promising, "I will make of you a great nation." Abram was 75, and his wife Sarai 65; she "was barren; she had no child" (11:30). The Lord kept him waiting a long time, for 25 years, before he fulfilled this promise. During this time Abram and Sarai wavered between belief and unbelief. Some time later Abram was discouraged, "what will you give me, for I continue childless...you have given me no offspring." The Lord reassured him, "your own son shall be your heir...Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them...So shall your offspring be." Abram "believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (15:2-6).

After ten years, Sarai had given up hope, saying to Abram, now 85: "the LORD has prevented me from bearing children" (16:2). She gave him her Egyptian maidservant Hagar, who conceived by him. Quickly things went wrong. Hagar looked with contempt on Sarai, who complained to her husband; he let her do whatever she wanted to Hagar. So Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, who fled. But an angel of the Lord found Hagar, and promised "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude... You shall call his name Ishmael," meaning "God hears." Ishmael was born to Hagar when Abram was 86.

After another 13 years God said, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham," meaning "father of a multitude" (17:4-5). He would give Abraham a son by Sarah. But Abraham was not so sure: "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?... Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" Sarah later overheard the promise that she would bear a son a year later. "Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah." Sarah laughed in disbelief. The Lord heard and said, "Is anything too hard [or wonderful] for the LORD?" (18:14). Sarah did conceive and birth a son who was called, per the Lord's instruction, Isaac, "he laughs."

That in a nutshell is the story of the two births. The son of the slave woman was born according to the flesh, born to a woman who was fertile. There was nothing extraordinary about his birth. His birth had nothing to do with faith or promise; indeed it happened because of disbelief in the promise. It happened because Sarai was trying to orchestrate a solution, and Abram, despite his earlier faith in God's word, went along with the plan. Yet God cared for this son and his mother Hagar. His name was Ishmael, "God hears." His twelve sons were the progenitors of the Arab tribes. From Ishmael eventually came Muhammad.

The son of the free woman was born in fulfilment of promise. After 25 years God was true to his word. This was an extraordinary birth. It required a supernatural work of God, for it was impossible

"according to the flesh." God kept Abraham and Sarah waiting for 25 years until it was absolutely clear that there was no human way of fulfilling this promise. From this son of promise came Israel and the Jews.

Such is the biblical account. Paul now offers an interpretation of the account.

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. 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." (4:24-27)**

The Genesis account of Hagar and Sarah is not itself an allegory; it is history. But Paul interprets that history figuratively, symbolically in light of subsequent history, especially in light of the Gentiles' response of faith to Jesus, whom he has already established is the true Seed of Abraham. The two women, the slave and the free, represent two covenants, two cities, two human conditions. Hagar the slave woman birthed Ishmael, whose twelve sons settled Arabia, then the land south and east of Canaan, including Sinai. But there is more than a geographical connection between Hagar and Sinai. At Mount Sinai God made a covenant with his people that they would keep his law. This law was a temporary measure for the time "before faith came." Israel was enslaved to the law. The Jews were simultaneously under the law, under sin, under the custodian, and under the curse. They were not free. This is the condition of "the present Jerusalem" whence the false teachers have come to trouble the Galatians. Paul makes the stunning connection that the present Jerusalem is actually the offspring of Hagar. Those who keep Torah are not the children of Sarah but of Hagar, not the children of promise but the children of the flesh unto enslavement. How this would have offended the false teachers! But it fits: keeping Torah is enslavement.

But there is another woman, another mother, another city. In contrast to the present Jerusalem enslaved to Torah, the "Jerusalem above" is free. Her residents are the children of the free woman, born through promise into freedom. The Gentiles have responded in faith to what they heard about Jesus. They have received the Spirit, evidence of the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham that in his seed would the nations be blessed. Abraham's seed, born through Sarah and her descendants in fulfilment of promise, is Christ himself. United with Christ and filled with his Spirit, the believers in Galatia, both Jew and Gentile, are free. Law has nothing to do with promise. The Jewish believers have been set free from the law, now that faith has come. And the Gentile believers do not need to come under the law, for the law is finished. The one to whom the custodian pointed has come.

Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1, addressed to God's old covenant people personified as Zion. She is bereft of people, bereft of offspring, for they are in exile in Babylon for their failure to keep the law. But just as once-barren Sarah miraculously birthed a son and a mighty nation, so would currently-barren Zion bear a multitude. This is what has happened in Galatia and elsewhere as the good news

of Jesus has been preached and Jews and Gentiles together have responded in faith.

So, Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus are children of Abraham through the free woman Sarah, according to promise; they are residents of the New Jerusalem. The Judaizers are children of Abraham through the slave woman Hagar, living enslaved lives according to the flesh; they are residents of the present Jerusalem. The present Jerusalem is part of the problem, hence the need for a new Jerusalem. The Book of Revelation is even more blunt about the status of the present Jerusalem, equating it symbolically with Babylon, Sodom and Egypt (11:8). Revelation and the Bible ends with a vision of the New Jerusalem, the city which comes down from heaven to earth, the city where God and his people dwell together through the blood of the Lamb.

As we heard in our Scripture reading (Heb 12:18–24), we have not come to Mount Sinai with its terrifying sights and sounds. But we have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. We have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to his sprinkled blood. As we sang, “He has hushed the law’s loud thunder, He has quenched Mount Sinai’s flame, He has washed us with his blood, He has brought us nigh to God.” Under the old covenant the blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat. Under the new covenant Jesus himself is the place of mercy, the meeting point between heaven and earth, between God and man. In him God is summing up all things, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph 1:10). The meeting place between heaven and earth, between God and man, is no longer a place but a person.

The church began in Jerusalem. It was here that God poured out his Spirit as promised by Jesus. The first Christians were all Jewish. They continued to meet in the Temple. But soon the church expanded beyond Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth, again as promised by Jesus. Gentiles came to faith, and the church in Jerusalem eventually decided that they did not have to become Jews and observe the Jewish identity markers. Jew and Gentile together have streamed in to Zion—not the earthly Zion, but the heavenly Zion.

The psalmist had a startling vision of this pilgrimage and birthright in Zion, as we heard in our call to worship:

**Among those who know me I mention Rahab [Egypt] and Babylon;
 behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush—
 “This one was born there,” they say.
 And of Zion it shall be said,
 “This one and that one were born in her”;
 for the Most High himself will establish her.
 The LORD records as he registers the peoples,
 “This one was born there.” (Ps 87:4–6)**

Even Israel’s archetypal enemies—Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre—will find a place in Zion. The Lord will register them, “This one was born in Zion.” We as Gentiles have joined that happy chorus. We have been recorded in the Lord’s register as born in Zion.

Next Paul moves to application to the current situation of the Galatian Christians:

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 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. 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.” So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (4:28–31)

The Gentile believers are not physical descendants of Isaac, but more importantly they are spiritual descendants for they are born according to promise; they are born according to a miraculous act of God. Isaac, born according to promise, was persecuted by Ishmael, born according to the flesh. Sarah saw Ishmael laughing or playing with her son Isaac. She complained 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” (Gen 21:10). Though the matter displeased Abraham, God told Abraham to send Hagar away. But God again came and found Hagar in her distress and provided for her.

Paul makes a second surprising interpretation of the ancient story. Just as Ishmael “persecuted” Isaac so do the current offspring of Hagar persecute the current offspring of Sarah. Who are these modern Ishmaelites? They are the Judaizers, these false teachers from Jerusalem who are trying to force the Gentile believers to become law-observant Jews and the Jewish believers to continue their law-observance. But those who are united with Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, have nothing to do with these Judaizers. The Judaizers are children of the slave woman, still enslaved to the law. But those who have responded in faith to Christ and have been filled with his Spirit are children of the free woman. They have a completely different identity. And so Paul urges them to cast the false teachers out of their midst.

The Judaizers, as Ishmaelites, are not heirs. They have no connection to the promise. Probably the false teachers viewed the Gentile believers as Ishmaelites who needed to become Jews, to become children of the free woman. But Paul shows that the Judaizers because of their ongoing identification with the law are enslaved as children of the slave woman. They are Ishmael.

Paul has devoted two intense chapters to this crucial issue of identity. He began, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (3:1), and ends with an implicit call to cast out these bewitching false teachers from their midst. He now ends his emotional appeal with the most important verse in the letter:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (5:1)

This is the climax of his argument in chapters 3–4: when we come to Christ we are free to live lives of freedom; we are no longer slaves. It also introduces the next section in which Paul describes what life in freedom looks like when we are in Christ and filled with the Spirit. But many Christians get nervous with such freedom. They want to impose rules and regulations—Jesus plus. They don’t trust Christians to live lives of freedom. But God puts his Spirit in us. This is how Paul began his argument at the beginning of chapter 3: the Galatian Christians have received the Spirit. This is the evidence that God has fulfilled his promise to Abraham, that in his seed shall all nations be blessed. We can have confidence that God puts his Spirit in us to transform us. He actually enables us to live an even higher standard of living than the law requires.

Do Jews, Christians and Muslims pray to the same God? All acknowledge one God whether in the *Shema*, the Nicene Creed, or

the *Shahadah*. But we have come to know this one God as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the God who pours out his Spirit so that we become like his Son. In Christ God has set us free. In his Spirit he is empowering us to be transformed from the inside out to live new lives, not by rules and regulations, not by Torah, not by Sharia, but by the very power of God at work in us. Our identity is that we have been united with Christ. God's Spirit in us confirms that we are the sons and daughters of God, members of his family. Our lives are being transformed to do what the law could never do and was never intended to do. This is what our Jewish and Muslim neighbors need to see in us. This is what they need to understand about this one God.

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